

T H E N E W  
A D V E N T U R E S

**NLA**



**DRY PILGRIMAGE**

PAUL LEONARD  
AND NICK WALTERS

# DRY PILGRIMAGE

**'I am going to make you immortal.'**

Bored with her job, bored with being perpetually skint, Bemice Summerfield leaps at the chance of a free holiday arranged by her new friend Maeve Ruthven, St Oscar's Professor of Comparative Religion.

But all is not what it seems.

Benny's holiday rapidly goes from bad to worse to downright dangerous. For a start, the 'luxury cruise' is a religious pilgrimage, and alcohol is forbidden to those on board. Then she is attacked, badly injured and confined to a wheelchair.

And that's before the murder.

Benny finds herself caught in a web of intrigue - not knowing who on board can be trusted or which way to turn. And with the future of more than one world depending on her actions, she must decide who to believe, expose the hidden killer and prevent a ruthless grab for power.

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**PAUL LEONARD** has written loads of things. Some of them are actually good, but most are only highly acclaimed. **NICK WALTERS** can often be seen zooming around Bristol on Bernice (his bicycle). This is his first novel.

Cover design: John Sullivan

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# NA

## DRY PILGRIMAGE

*Bernice twisted to dodge the weapon, fell, and her attacker pounced. She found herself on her back, the soldier standing over her, face still blank. He pulled back his arm, aiming the spike right at her heart.*

*She scrambled backwards as the arm lanced forward and thank God missed, but what was that cold feeling in her leg?*

*She looked down to see the spike embedded in her left thigh.*

*'Please,' whispered Bernice, trying to keep her voice calm, 'don't take the spike out. Please. Just leave it there.'*

T H E   N E W  

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DRY PILGRIMAGE  
Paul Leonard & Nick Walters

**NA**

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For my mother, Diane Celia Walters

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Paul Leonard, without whom this book would have been impossible. What am I saying? It was nearly impossible anyway! When do we start the next one?

Mum and Dad, for taking me in whilst I searched and saved for my dream home.

The Bristol local DWAS group - Darren, Kevin, Paul, Steve, Nick and Sarah, for evenings of hilarity. My ex-housemate Andrew Shattock - stay in touch! Alastair Hooley - next time I'm up in London, we'll have that pint.

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Mention also for my absent friends: David (don't look for mentions of you-know-who for there are none), Mike and Susie, Andrew, Brian and Vicky, Alistair Douglas, and my sister Caroline - I'll try to see more of you this summer!

*Paul would like to thank:*

Nick, for doing most of it.

His mother, for putting up with it.

Barb, for listening to it.

Nadia, for talking about something else (most of the time).

## OUT TO GET YOU

Theo Tamlyn sat in the Witch and Whirlwind bar of Garland College, a pint of Admiral's Old Antisocial cool and heavy in his hand. The bar was full of groups: couples, students, social animals. Theo looked around, just a little embarrassed, wondering if anyone else was on their own. In the end he counted two other singletons — a short, squat man in dark, smart clothes at the bar, looking rather out of place among the colourful raggle-taggle of students, and an old professor at a corner table, squinting at a copy of this week's campus bulletin.

Bernice Summerfield was there, but she definitely wasn't on her own. She was sitting at a table across the room, in the midst of her tutorial group. They were all third-year students and, at eighteen, Theo found them intimidating. If she had been on her own, maybe he could have talked to her. As it was, he just didn't have the nerve.

Theo watched as Bernice alternately talked, laughed and took big swigs from a pint. She had a mop of short black hair with a ruffled fringe. She was wearing tight blue trousers, boots and a baggy black T-shirt. Theo had never seen anything like those huge silver earrings. She was beautiful.

Theo sighed, and stood up to watch the band. The floor was sticky with spilt beer. The air was heavy and almost narcotic with smoke. It made Theo's eyes water, and did strange things to his lungs, liver and stomach. A makeshift stage had been set up in one corner of the room, with ancient loudspeakers looming on either side. The stage was bathed in shifting amoeba lights of orange and yellow. A small, big-eyed girl was singing hoarse, wistful songs, which made Theo feel both homesick and at home at the same time. Her backing band were a four-piece insectoid ensemble - guitar,



bass, drums, synths. They were so angular it was hard to tell where the instruments ended and their chitinous limbs began.

Theo tried to lose himself in the music, but he couldn't slop his gaze from wandering over to Bernice. He wondered how he could approach her, what he could say.

The annoying thing was, he'd had an ideal opportunity the first time he'd met her, but hadn't had the savvy to do anything about it. He'd been late for a lecture, running like mad through the south gate of Goodyear College, and he'd collided with a woman on a bicycle. They fell together in a tangle of limbs, wheels and swear-words. Once they extricated themselves, he was amazed to find that the woman was a professor. He recognized Bernice from the dust-jacket of *Down Among the Dead Men*, one of the few readable text books he'd encountered - in any field, let alone archaeology, which was normally, let's face it, as dull as ditches. He dumbly helped her pick up the books and stuff which had fallen from the bike's basket. She didn't say anything much as she cycled off, apart from a quick 'thank you', but she rang her bicycle bell. The sound seemed to galvanize him into action. Professor Bernice Summerfield was a real person, the most real person he'd so far met at St Oscar's, and he wanted to get to know her. But by then it was too late to sneak one of the books into his pocket, pretend he'd found' it later.

Knowing that Bernice's favourite haunt was the Witch and Whirlwind, he decided to go there as often as funds and coursework would allow. The plan was to wait for Bernice to turn up. drink a few pints and pluck up the courage to go and chat her up. Simple enough.

But now he had to do it.

Theo took a pull of his pint, revelling in the fresh nutty taste. Admiral's Old Antisocial was Theo's favourite beer. He was on his third pint now, and the time was approaching when he would have to do something. Much more beer and he'd be too inebriated to talk without it showing. And closing time wasn't far off.

Theo decided. He would walk over and speak to her. Now. He wouldn't give himself time to think - he'd just do it.

He drained his glass and walked straight over. There were about twelve people sitting around two circular red plastic-topped tables awash with spilt beer. Everyone was talking loudly, oblivious of all around, including the band and Theo.

He recognized some of Bernice's tutorial group: Vitor Pluse, and a snooty girl with jet-black hair called Jane Waspo. There were many empty glasses on the table, most of them in front of Bernice.

Theo hovered on the fringes, trying to think of something to say. Maybe he could mention the accident. Yes, that was good. It was the only reason he had to talk to her. Better than mentioning the book - that would be too fannish.

The band launched into a lurching rockabilly number. Theo stepped forward, at exactly the same time that Bernice happened to look round, frowning at the sudden racket. She caught his eye with a look of faint surprise.

Theo took in her angular, attractive face - wide eyes, wide mouth, floppy fringe, those massive earrings. A face alive with interest and experience. He fixed his eyes on hers, concentrating on holding her stare.

Bernice was waiting for him to say something or go away. So say something. Anything! But the part of his brain that made his voice work had crawled away and died peacefully without even making a will.

To Theo's relief, Bernice spoke - or rather, shouted - first. 'Hello there!'

Theo dropped to his haunches, instantly feeling undignified. He forced himself to smile. 'Hello!'

'Oh, go away,' cried Vitor.

'Manners, Vitor!' chided Bernice, laughing. 'Well? Who are you and what do you want?'

Theo took a deep breath. He felt hot and small and was sure she could see he was sweating. 'Hello. I'm Theo. Are you all right? Um, I mean, the other week I bumped into you when you were on your bike, and... '

Bernice frowned. 'Um, yes, I'm fine now.' It was obvious she didn't remember him. Panic surged in his guts. He could feel Vitor's stare and Jane's scorn, like insects crawling over his face, ready to sting at any moment. He wrung his hands together in his lap. Elation swept through him as he realized what six words would be most likely to endear him to Bernice for ever: 'Can I buy you a pint?'

'Thought you'd never ask,' said Bernice.

'Get me one as well!' called Vitor.

'Last orders!' came Charlie the robarman's tinny voice over the loudspeaker system.

'You'd better get a move on,' said Bernice.

'Yeah,' said Theo, trying to sound cool. 'Admiral's all right?'

Bernice nodded.

Theo smiled at her, stood up and walked to the bar, feeling about a million miles high.

At the bar, he bought three pints of Admiral's, thus using up all his money. He carried them carefully back to Bernice's table and put them down. Vitor grabbed his without a word of thanks. Theo's heartbeat quickened. Vitor, Bernice and himself were the only ones there. The others must have gone to the bar, or the toilet — wherever, he didn't care. He sat down opposite Bernice. He couldn't bring himself to sit right next to her, not with Vitor watching.

'Good band,' he said.

'You think so?' said Bernice. 'Not my scene, actually. I'm more into jazz these days.'

Theo had no idea what jazz was. 'Nice,' he said.

'The boy's smitten!' crowed Vitor.

Theo grinned and gritted his teeth.

'To what do I owe this pleasure?' said Bernice, staring at him from between her pint and her fringe.

'If pleasure it be,' said Vitor, scowling.

'Um, well, I've read *Down Among the Dear! Men* and...'

He tailed off.

'And...?'

'I really liked it, and I'm not just saying that. Archaeology's not my main topic but the way you wrote made me want to find out more.'

She was smiling. He had her attention.

'What is your main topic?'

Theo's heart jumped. She was interested! 'X-xenobiology,' he stammered.

At that moment, five more people turned up, back from the bar and laden with pints. They all sat down around Bernice, ignoring Theo.

A sharp finger jabbed his shoulder.

'You're in my seat.'

Theo looked up. Jane Waspo glared down at him. Theo was standing up and apologizing before he knew what he was doing. Jane promptly sat down. Cursing his in-built politeness, Theo looked around for another stool. He ended up between Vitor and a fat guy he didn't recognize - and too far away from Bernice to carry on the conversation. His heart sank to his boots.

Then Bernice caught his eye. She raised her glass, smiled and winked, and he returned the gesture. Too late, she was already talking to someone else.

Theo sat for a long time saying nothing, sipping his beer, waiting for a chance to intervene in Bernice's conversation. This was difficult, as he couldn't hear a word she was saying. The band were breezing through a cover of an old pop song Theo recognized - 'You're in a Bad Way'. Theo tried to ignore the irony by concentrating on Bernice.

Just as Theo was about to decide to get a bit nearer to her, Charlie the robarman called time.

Everyone got up to leave.

Theo tried to walk over to Bernice, but the fat guy stepped in front of him, blocking his way. Theo was forced to walk around him, and then got caught up in the crush of people heading for the doors.

He looked around frantically for Bernice. Where was she? Bloody hell - he'd lost her!

He pushed his way through the crowd. Outside, he breathed in the warm summer night air. It cleared his lungs and his head.

Groups of people stood about, talking loudly, saying good night, kissing, or urinating against the walls. Theo couldn't see Bernice among them.

He swore.

All at once he was aware of someone standing beside him. It was the man in smart clothes whom Theo had noticed propping up the bar earlier. He had short, black hair and his eyes were large in his round face. He looked older even than Bernice. Who was he? A lecturer? A professor?

'I've got a message for you. From your lady friend. From Bernice.' His voice was deep and clipped. 'She says she wants to meet you.'

Theo sighed. He could detect the hand of Vitor in this, or perhaps Jane Waspo. 'Yeah?' he asked suspiciously.

The man ignored his tone. 'Know the bench on the hill out past Goodyear College?' he asked.

Theo did. He liked to go there sometimes to admire the view.

The stranger pointed at him solemnly. 'Be there in ten minutes.'

Theo sighed again. 'You're making this up. Who are you?'

The man smiled. His mouth looked unusually small and delicate for such a stockily built man. 'I'm a scientist.'

'Is that supposed to convince me that everything you say is true?'

The 'scientist' raised his hands. 'It's up to you what you believe. I'm just passing on a message.'

'How very kind of you,' said Theo.

The man shrugged, and walked back into the college buildings.

Theo knew he had no choice. He had to check.

He set off up the red-brick path which led to the bench. It was a beautiful night, mild and clear. Below him, the

windows of Garland and Goodyear Halls glowed with slow nocturnal life.

At the top of the rise, he saw the bench, to the right of the path, in front of a small, dense copse of trees. There was no one around. Theo hung back, breathing heavily. The beer was making his legs feel weak. He was seeing things in the shadows as well. He blinked and rubbed his eyes. Vitor and Jane were probably waiting in the trees for him. Waiting for him to fall into their trap. What could it be? Perhaps, if he sat on the bench, he would be unable to get up because it had been smeared with heavy-duty contact adhesive. Hilarious.

There was a bush some distance from the bench and the copse, and he crouched in its shadows, until the ten minutes had passed.

No one approached the bench. All was still and quiet.

Theo relaxed a little. He didn't think that anyone would wait this long to play a joke on him. Which meant that the message could have been genuine.

Theo walked quickly to the bench, looking around for Bernice, which brought home to him the foolishness of the situation.

Perhaps this was the worst kind of joke. The kind with no punchline.

He touched the seat of the bench tentatively, just to be sure it was all right, and then sat down and sighed.

He would wait a bit more, and then go back.

He could see his college, Goodyear, close by. He was almost level with the tops of the buildings. The Hall of Residence was like a large upturned pudding, dotted with the lights of insomniacs or late workers. Various bulbous out-buildings huddled around it - the refectory, library, lecture halls. Beyond this, he could see the humped shape of the next island and the liny lights of its colleges and halls.

Theo could also make out Garland College Hall, where Bernice was probably sipping her cocoa or saying her prayers or whatever it was she did before bedtime, oblivious to the humiliation being perpetrated in her name.

There was a rustling in the trees behind him. Theo jumped up from the bench and turned round. Was that a movement in the trees? Was it Bernice - was she really here? Or had he made a complete and utter fool of himself?

The rustling stopped. Perhaps it had been the wind.

Theo sat down again, feeling uneasy.

And then he heard the footsteps. Swift, deliberate footsteps. Behind him. Approaching him.

This was it - whatever it was.

Theo jumped up.

There was a figure just behind the bench. He couldn't make it out against the darkness of the trees, and after-images of the lights below made things even more difficult. It was tall - much taller than him - and thin.

Whoever this was, it was not Bernice. It looked alien.

'What do you want?' he called out.

'Turn around.' Its fluting voice was accented strangely, as if it had just learnt his language, and was underpinned by an eerie, low sound, as though another voice was humming along to the alien's words.

'What? Why?' Theo stepped towards it, the bench between him and the figure. He could see now that it was clad from head to foot in a black cape. A hood covered the head.

A long-fingered claw emerged from the cape. The claw was holding something. Something shining in the moonlight. It was pointing at Theo like it was a gun.

That was because, Theo realized, it was a gun.

'Turn around,' repeated the alien.

Theo obeyed. He could feel his legs wobbling, his heart hammering. He suddenly felt the urgent need to pee.

'Don't - don't shoot me,' he stammered.

He heard its footsteps as it walked around the bench. Something hard and very like the muzzle of a gun was pressed into the small of his back.

'You are to walk into that cluster of tall vegetation. I will be following you. If you make a sound or deviate from these instructions, I will kill you. Move forward slowly - now.'

These words were delivered quickly and softly, and on the last word, the thing dug the gun into his back. He stumbled forward, on to the path.

Theo could not believe what was happening. This was ridiculous - it had to be a joke. It *must* be a joke. However sick, however embarrassing, a joke had to be better than the alternative possibility.

That it was for real.

He stopped, and turned to face the creature. It stood, pointing the gun at him.

The hood flapped in a sudden breeze to reveal a glimpse of shiny, pale skin - or was it scales? Theo mentally flipped through a few of the races he'd so far studied on his course: Grel, Canopusi, Chelonian. None fitted.

A moth fluttered towards the alien, and with a sudden and deadly snapping noise, was snatched out of the air by a long black tongue which whipped out of the alien's mouth.

Theo gasped. 'What are you?'

In answer to his question, it did something to the gun, which began to whine menacingly.

Theo realized that this was no joke.

He could run. He could at least try. But he'd never outrun the weapon. His only chance was to play for time. He fixed his eyes on the hooded face. 'What are you going to do to me?'

The alien made a strange hissing sound, like escaping steam. 'I am going to make you immortal. Now, move! Into the cluster of tall vegetation.'

Feeling cold despite the summer night heat, Theo walked on to the grass, headed for the trees. Immortal? What did it mean? This was all so unreal - Bernice, the strange scientist, now *this* - how had he lost control so totally? What had he done to deserve *this*?

He walked shakily towards the trees.

He never reached them.



## LIVING TOO LATE

Bernice Summerfield sat in the library of St Oscar's University, staring at a datascreen, trying to ignore the many symptoms of a particularly impressive hangover.

Every time she moved her head, her eyeballs throbbed. Her stomach rippled every now and then - probably one of her internal organs gasping its last. Her lips were sore with incipient ulcers. Her throat was dry and tickly. Her back ached.

Maybe her body was getting too old to cope with all these drinking sessions. Maybe she should cut down. Maybe she should exercise more, remove the gravitic motor from her bicycle.

Bernice shook her head. No, she was still young(ish), she could still handle it - hopefully.

She switched her attention from her beleaguered body to the screen in front of her, on which was a half-finished set of notes on the ruins on Urtilaxia. Urtilaxia was a dreary planet in a nearby system, upon which Bernice had spent an uneventful fortnight grubbing around in what had to be the most boring pile of ruins she had ever encountered.

She'd known they were going to be boring, and she hadn't wanted to go, but she'd had no choice. Various heads of departments had got together and decided that it was about time Urtilaxia was surveyed again. The ruins hadn't been touched for almost a century. Bernice's contention that they could go untouched for at least another century had been ignored.

The Urtilaxian ruins consisted of a line of a dozen or so nondescript grey slabs leaning at lazy angles out of the sand. There were two theories about them: one, favoured by the

Archaeology Department, was that they were the remains of a palace of the ancient, once-great Urtillaxian Empire; the other, favoured by the Department of Comparative Religion, was that the ruins were all that remained of a huge temple of a vanished faith. It was no coincidence that the grants funding any major expedition there would be paid to the Archaeology Department in the former case, and the Department of Comparative Religion in the latter. It was therefore also not exactly a surprise that the Department of Comparative Religion had got wind of Bernice's little trip and seen fit to send one of their professors, Maeve Ruthven, in the hope that she could decipher some inscriptions which were supposed to be discernible on the surface of the stones, and prove that they were religious in nature. Bernice had a similar brief to prove that they were secular, hymns of praise to the glory of the King-Emperor, or possibly lists of royal cutlery.

Unfortunately for both Professors Summerfield and Ruthven, the 'inscriptions' had very quickly proved to be no more than the random effects of weathering. The two women had therefore given up on the ruins and together, over a bottle of Chateau Yquatine, formulated a new theory that the ruins were all that remained of the support pillars of the main Urtillaxian motorway.

Bernice couldn't put that theory in her notes, of course. She didn't know *what* she could put in her notes. With one linger, she tapped two words into her document. Those words were 'boring' and 'bugger'. Perhaps she'd wait for Maeve to turn up.

Meeting Maeve had been the only good thing about the trip. She was just the opposite of what Bernice would have expected: small, quick, bright, sarcastic. On dusty, dour Urtillaxia, they'd spent a wine-fuelled, chummy evening together, and by the end of it Bernice found herself warming to Maeve greatly. Maeve had poured out her problems with Brion, her estranged husband, which had (under the influence of alcohol) sounded similar enough to Bernice's

problems with Jason to make the two women friends for life.

Bernice glanced at the clock on her screen and sighed in irritation. Where was Maeve? They had arranged to meet at least half an hour ago.

As if on cue, Maeve appeared, dancing into the room like a pixie with a plastic cup of coffee in her hand. She wore sandals and her dress was cut of a rough green denim-like material. She also wore a lot of rings and bracelets, and around her neck at least three dangly cords bearing icons and symbols of various kinds which clicked and clacked together almost constantly. Prominent among these was the stylized hand icon of Mauve's faith, Marunianism.

'You're late,' growled Bernice.

'Yer arse,' shot back Maeve, and plonked the coffee down on Bernice's desk.

Although Maeve was only a couple of years younger than Bernice, she looked hardly out of her teens. She had a small mouth and large brown eyes, their size emphasized by her severely cropped red hair. Her Scottish ancestry gave her voice a singsong lilt which Bernice loved, partly because it was somehow familiar. Her skin was light brown and she had small hands which were always clasped together or fluttering about or adjusting something. Her eyebrows fascinated Bernice - they were so thin and dark they looked painted on, but as Maeve said that she never wore make-up Bernice supposed that they couldn't be.

'Brush that Urtilaxian dust away, I've gone and swung us a free holiday!' sang Maeve, doing a little twirl.

'What?'

'How does a duce-week cruise on the Silvasic Sea sound?' Bernice stretched and yawned. 'Like just what I need right

The Silvasic Sea was the largest body of water on Dellah, taking up much of the temperate zone in the southern hemisphere. Bernice had never been there, but the name conjured up images of shimmering surf, lush green islands and broad yellow beaches.

One thing Bernice had learnt, however, was that if there was no such thing as a free lunch there was certainly no such thing as a free holiday. She folded her arms. 'What's the catch?'

Maeve plonked herself down on the edge of Bernice's desk. Bernice had to snatch the coffee cup away quickly. 'Oh, there's no catch. The whole thing's arranged for these exiled aliens.' Maeve waved a hand, bangles jangling. 'They want to consecrate a shrine on one of the Silvasic islands, so that they can start a settlement here.'

'Hang on - what exiled aliens?'

'Saraani. Tall, weird-looking, religious.'

Bernice blew on her coffee to cool it down. 'Never heard of them.'

'Not surprised. No one knows much about them. There was a revolution on their homeworld. A bunch of atheists seized power and the religious orders were booted out.' Maeve frowned.

'It happens a lot Maeve,' said Bernice. 'Religion and belief are often outlawed by new orders, or new versions of the same thing.'

Maeve folded her arms and said angrily, 'I know it happens a lot, but it doesn't make me feel any better about it.' It was time to change the subject. She knew that Maeve was deeply religious, though she hadn't become preachy or pious about it. Not yet, anyway. Now wasn't a good time to start her off. 'Why is it going to take a three-week cruise to get these Saraani to one of these islands?' she asked. 'Why can't they be just, well, flown there?'

'It's a pilgrimage. They would walk, if they could. But they can't walk on water -' an elfin grin however much they might want to. So they've chartered this huge pleasure liner, and the whole thing will take at least three weeks - possibly more, depending on how long it takes to find a suitable island.'

'Hang on,' said Bernice. 'Doesn't sound like much fun. I mean, me? On a religious pilgrimage?'

'The Saraani have their own section on the liner,' said Maeve. 'We'll have the run of the facilities - swimming pools, banqueting halls, games halls, luxury cabins, sauna, Jacuzzi...'

This sounded too good to be true. Bernice felt as if she had to tread carefully, in case the whole thing collapsed around her. 'How, pray, is a confirmed atheist like me going to get on this jaunt, if it's a pilgrimage?'

'I've convinced Professor Urquhart - my Head of Department - that we're a dream team, me and you. Archaeology and religious research go together like you won't believe. I made it one of the conditions that you came along.'

'Maeve, you're a star!'

'There might, after all, be some archaeological work on one of the islands. '

Bernice sipped her coffee. 'Goodness me, I hope not.'

'I said there *might*. Anyway, we won't be alone - half the university's in on it. Professor Southernay is gonna take some scans of the sea bed. There are some others -' Maeve spread her hands and shrugged I don't know who yet. '

'I see,' said Bernice. 'I bet certain departments have been falling over themselves trying to find reasons to get in on this.'

'All looking for a free hol,' laughed Maeve. 'Lucky you I'll be the busy one, ministering to our alien pilgrims' needs.'

'Think they'll make you take part in one of their sacrificial ceremonies?'

Maeve frowned. 'No, I just hope they'll find somewhere suitable for their settlement. Joking aside, they've had a hell of a time. What's happened to them - well, it shouldn't have, that's all' A pause. 'Sometimes I hate the historical process. '

Bernice looked at her closely, wondering if there was more to this than just Saraani. Hadn't Maeve said that her husband was some kind of political refugee? Still, best to keep off that subject right now.

'You're slightly in awe of the Saraani, aren't you?' she asked.

Maeve looked at Bernice, eyes narrowing slightly, dearly looking for signs of a wind-up. Cautiously she said, 'Not awe, exactly. But I've met their leader a few times and I'm convinced that the Swami are the closest creatures to God I've ever encountered. They are so holy, so totally without sin.'

'Unlike us,' muttered Bernice.

'So, are you in?' asked Maeve.

Bernice looked at her datascreen. Images of Urtilaxia, Dr Follett, and her painfully low credit balance swam through her head. It took her three tenths of a second to decide. 'Are you mad? Of course I'm in. When do we leave?'

'A week today.'

'Plenty of time to pack!'

'Shit, shit, shit, where is it?'

Departure time was in less than half an hour, and Bernice still hadn't finished packing. She couldn't find her swimsuit anywhere. She'd never needed it until now she wasn't surprised. There were also a million and one essential holiday items she was sure she'd need, but she couldn't remember what they bloody well were.

After all, it *had* been a long time since her last holiday. The week between her chat with Maeve and this frantic morning had been filled with:

- finishing the notes on Urtilaxia
- stocking up on booze
- finding someone to give the lecture in her place
- convincing Dr Follett that it was really important that she went (she'd told him that some of the islands in the Silvasic Sea hadn't been properly explored - to her amazement, she found that this shameless fabrication happened to be true. and Dr Follett had insisted that she should go)
- marking some assignments
- stocking up on booze

- finding someone to look after Wolsey (she didn't trust Joseph, and anyway, Wols needed human contact)
- shaving her bikini line
- lending her bike to Menlove Stokes (on the strict proviso that he return it the same shape and colour)
- stocking up on booze

As far as Bernice was concerned, the journey was to be a holiday first and foremost. If she found anything of interest on the islands, well, good, but she wasn't going to bust a gut over it.

After rummaging in every cupboard and looking under the bed for the fifth time, Bernice gave up her search. She could always improvise a bathing costume.

She tugged her rucksack straps tight and hefted it. It weighed three hundred tons, at least, but she wouldn't be lugging it across deserts or swamps - only as far as the taxi, and from there on to the ship.

One thing left to do. Say goodbye to Wolsey.

He padded into the room at that moment, as if he could read her thoughts. He took one look at her rucksack, and hopped on to a windowsill, seemingly indifferent.

Bernice sighed. He'd seen the packed rucksack enough times to know what it meant. 'Oh, Wols, don't sulk. Joseph will feed you, and Jane's going to come round and play with you. Lucky, lucky you.'

Bernice plucked him up from the windowsill and cuddled him, breathing in his warns catty smell. He tolerated her attentions for a while, until he struggled to be returned to terra firma.

'Well, servant woman's off now,' she said, glancing around at the reassuring, familiar jumble of her college rooms. 'Don't forget about me.'

Bernice had been to St Oscar's spaceport many times, but never to its seaport on the southernmost of the nine islands.

Dellah was quite a watery planet, but sea transport was not common. People would rather fly above the ocean than travel

on it. There were not many large ships on the planet-the Goll Navy owned most - and St Oscar's had only one large seafaring vessel, the *Lady of Lorelei*. This had originally belonged to an Earth-based leisure company that had gone bust. St Oscar's had bought it, intending to use it for research purposes and the occasional cruise, but had then run out of money and used it for storing surplus cryogenic equipment. University gossip was that it was due to be sold for scrap when the Saraani had come along and inked to hire it.

The taxi stopped at the edge of the port and Bernice paid the driver and got out. The salty sea air hit her, clearing her head and instantly putting her in a holiday frame of mind. The port was small - a cluster of white customs buildings, a cylindrical tower with a radar dish on top, and a wide apron of concrete, which stopped abruptly at the edge of the sea.

And there stood the *Lady of Lorelei*, vast and white against the clear blue sky.

Something about it made Bernice stand there, rucksack dumped on the tarmac, and gape in awe, feeling nostalgic for somewhere she had never been. Its hull rose like a cliff of white metal, dwarfing the port buildings, reflecting the sun so brightly that Bernice had to shade her eyes. Above deck level rose the superstructure, so seamless and elegant that it looked though it had been constructed by an architect with a penchant for early-twentieth-century Earth hotel design. It eked at once eggshell-delicate and totally impregnable. Somehow it seemed more incredible that such a thing could eel on the sea, than spaceships ply their way between liners and star systems. A canopied gangway extended from hull to rest on the concrete of the dock. Bernice hurried towards this, her T-shirt already clingy with sweat.

A small figure ran down the gangway. 'Benny! You're late.' It was Maeve. 'Quick, run, we're off in a minute.'

The rucksack's straps were digging into Bernice's shoulders. can no sooner run than fly.'

'Well, then, you'd better grow wings, quick.' Maeve turned and hurried up the gangway.



Bernice gritted her teeth and followed.

Up close, she was dismayed to see patches of rust and peeling paint on the hull of the ship. It was like seeing a sticking-plaster on a princess's ankle.

Two men in pale-blue uniforms awaited them, their faces shiny with perspiration. The tall one on the left had grey hair, rather dashing moustache and a very erect posture. He looked rather dapper, and slightly uptight. He had to be the captain.

By contrast, the other was short, broad and slightly scruffy, his uniform creased and rather worn-looking. He looked so piratical, with his long raven-black hair - he even had a silver earring - that Bernice had to stifle a laugh.

'Sorry I'm late, but I couldn't find my bathing costume.'

The piratical guy smiled crookedly, and his eyes twinkled, Bernice decided that she quite liked him.

'Professor Summerfield?' asked the other, and from his raised eyebrows she knew he'd been expecting some doddering old academic.

Bernice unshouldered her rucksack. 'That's me.'

'I am Captain Dieter Fontana, and this is my first mate Karl Donimo.'

'I'm afraid I'm going to have to search your bag, Professor Summerfield,' said Donimo.

Bernice clutched her rucksack. 'Why?'

'This is a religious voyage, and there are certain considerations,' said the captain. 'Can you deal with this, Karl? I'm needed on the bridge.' He strode off through the entrance lobby.

Donimo took her rucksack to a small table just inside. Bernice followed him. She didn't want him rummaging through her underwear. And also, he might find - oh, no. Donimo slid two bottles of golden liquid from a compartment of Bernice's rucksack.

Two bottles of Isle of Jura 45-year-old single malt.

He held them up by the neck, one in each hand. 'I'm afraid we're going to have to confiscate these.'

Bernice groaned.

Donimo placed the bottles on the table and reached into her rucksack again.

Bernice held her breath.

Donimo pulled out two swan-necked blue bottles. 'And these.'

That's Chateau Yquatine. Not just any old cheap plonk.' Donimo shrugged, and placed the wine next to the whisky. Bernice turned to Maeve. 'You knew about this, didn't you?'

Maeve blinked. 'Yes I did. Saraani religion forbids alcohol. They told me a few days ago. Sorry, forgot to tell you.'

'Bloody, bloody hell.' Bernice watched helplessly as Donimo put her precious bottles into a black zip-up bag. 'I was looking forward to a few drinks on the open deck, looking out over the sea.'

'You'll not miss it,' said Donimo. 'There's plenty else to do on a long voyage like this.' He winked at her.

Bernice wasn't in the mood for flirting. 'What's going to happen to them?' she asked crossly.

'I'm going to take them to my cabin and drink them myself.'

Bernice sighed. 'And really?'

'Really, they'll be locked away, and you can have them when we get back. Follow me inside, please. We leave in a few minutes.'

Bernice did up her rucksack and swung it over her shoulder, muttering, 'Three weeks - at least - without a drink'

Bernice and Maeve walked side by side along a wide corridor. Pastel pictures of people doing leisurely things adorned the walls. Art-deco lamps threw golden fans of light across the blue carpet. It all looked quite grand if you didn't kick too closely. Then you would see frayed and faded carpet, chipped picture frames, wires poking from the lamp fittings and the odd suspicious-looking stain on the wall. The corridor led into a roomy, carpeted lounge area with a viewing window overlooking the port. Stairs, doors and lifts led off in various directions, and there was a large kidney-shaped reception desk - unmanned - along one wall. Muzak twirled away at the very edge of Bernice's hearing. A few people sat around on sofas, or stood at the window.

‘Your cabin is on H Deck - ultraluxury,’ said Donimo. He handed a validation card to Bernice. ‘Professor Ruthven, will you show Professor Summerfield to her cabin? I’m off to the bridge.’ He winked at them and walked towards a door in the fur wall, taking with him Bernice’s bottles of whisky and wine.

Maeve spoke for the first time in a while. ‘I’m sorry, Benny. I’ve really had a lot to organize, for the Saraani, you know. I just forgot’

‘You “just forgot”? You’re the one who arranged this holiday! And a holiday without alcohol is - well, not a holiday!’

‘Sorry.’

‘So what else is forbidden? Blasphemy? Bonking? Breathing?’

‘The world doesn’t revolve around alcohol, you know!’ said Maeve.

‘Yours might not.’

Several people had turned to look at them. Maeve looked at her with a pleading expression, and said in a quieter tone of voice, ‘Surely you can do without it for a bit?’

‘I can, but I don’t like being told that I have to.’

Maeve sighed. ‘Sorry, all right?’

‘No, it’s not all right!’

‘Well, tough.’ Maeve’s face had turned stony. ‘Those are the rules, and I’m sorry I forgot to tell you. Maybe you should have done some research yourself. I thought you were a bit more tolerant of other people’s beliefs, Benny.’

Maeve’s words hit Bernice where it hurt. She prided herself on her open-mindedness. ‘Bollocks to this - I’m going!’ She hefted her rucksack.

‘You can’t go just like that!’

‘Just watch me!’ Bernice walked back along the corridor, knowing how childish she was being, but unable to stop herself.

A prolonged hooting sound stopped Bernice in her tracks. ‘What’s that?’

She ran along the corridor and around the corner. Through a white mesh gate, she could see the gangway slowly retracting, with a painful grinding, clanking sound.

She was too late.

She walked back along the corridor.

Maeve was standing in the lounge, hands on hips, staring at her. Bernice didn't meet her gaze. Instead, she made for a door which opened out on to the deck, not looking to see if Maeve followed.

Outside, it was surprisingly windy, and everything looked bright and clean. Bernice squinted. Professors Southernay and Ingerskjold were leaning on the railing, with a few crew members. Suddenly the humming escalated, and there was a slight jolt. The siren sounded again. Bernice walked up to the railing and looked over. The port was sliding away. The wind caught her face, filling her nostrils with the smell of salt sea and fresh paint from the ship. Over the roofs of the customs warehouses, she could just make out the familiar red-brick humps of St Oscar's. Her home.

Perhaps she could swim for it, back to her rooms and Wolsey and a decent pint.

Bernice peered over the rail. Quite a long way beneath her war foam-specked swirling seawater, dark green and deep-looking.

Swim for it? In that lot? By the side of a giant floating metal hotel doing about twenty clicks? She realized what she was contemplating. Come on, Summerfield, it won't be too bad. Three weeks without alcohol will definitely be good for you. Her stomach gurgled, as if in joyous agreement.

It gurgled again, and Bernice felt a slight lurching sensation deep in her abdomen. Also a faint up-and-down movement. She gripped the railing more tightly. To her left, she could see a vast white wake curl out behind the ship, and slosh against the grey port wall.

She turned to Maeve, who had quietly joined her by the rail.

'Sorry, Maeve. I overreacted. I was a bit hassled, what with being late and everything,'

'Oh, that's OK.' Maeve sounded distracted.

'What's up?' asked Bernice.

'Oh, nothing you need worry about.'

Bernice shrugged. Probably trouble with the Saraani. Bernice felt a twinge of curiosity. She hadn't actually seen any of these holy aliens yet.

The deck under her gave a lurch. She staggered and gripped the rail tighter. The engine noise increased until it resembled Bernice's washing machine on full spin.

'I'm off inside,' said Maeve. 'See you at lunch.'

'If I survive till then,' muttered Bernice.

A while later, Bernice was sitting in a deckchair. Well, sprawling, more accurately. She wondered how the hell anyone ever found these wooden-and-canvas monstrosities comfortable. It was a nostalgia thing, she supposed.

Her stomach felt light and fluttery. She tried to ignore the sensation, but it wouldn't go away. Goddess, she wasn't going to get *seasick*, was she? She'd heard the word - there'd been something about it in the travel literature - but she'd assumed that after all the spaceships, time machines, hovercraft, VW Beetles, horses and carts, dirigibles and so on that she'd travelled in, she wouldn't -

The engine noise stepped up a few gears and the ship's up-and-down motion increased. Bernice's guts began to contract. Then expand. Then contract again. All with increasing frequency. She felt like she was being squeezed like a tube of toothpaste. What did she have for breakfast? Coffee, doughnuts, peach halves - all fighting to escape from her body through her mouth.

She leant over the side of the chair and heaved uncontrollably, holding her eyes in with her fingers as her stomach flipped and churned like it was being yanked about by a rope. She heard the vomit splatter against the polished wood of the deck beneath her feet.

At last it stopped, and Bernice stood up, feeling empty and foolish and wiping bits of vomit from her chin. This was worse than hangover vomiting. You feel better after that -

'better out than in', as the saying goes - but Bernice didn't feel any better after this.

'Oh, good grief.' Her stomach heaved again, and a thin spatter of residual vomit splashed the front of her clothes and dribbled down her chin. When she straightened up at last, it was to see Donimo standing in front of her.

'You'll find your sea-legs eventually, ma'am,' he said in an irritatingly cheerful voice. 'These might help.' He handed Bernice a small tube.

"'Doc Shanley's Anti-Heave Pills'," read Bernice. "'Take two at a time. Do not exceed the recommended dose.'"

Bernice opened the tube and downed half a dozen of the small pink capsules. She immediately felt sick again. She rushed to the rail, leant over the side, opened her mouth, retched, and out came the pills, coated in mucus and stomach goo.

'Lunch in an hour, ma'am,' said Donimo behind her. 'Devilled cod and curried moyan beans.'

'Goddess help me,' croaked Bernice, and passed out.

## TROUBLE WITH THE PLUMBING

Bernice woke to find herself lying on something soft, staring up at a billowing white sheet, the taste of sick in her mouth. Where was she? She sat up, the movement bringing on dryretch which brought tears to her eyes. She wiped them away and looked around, mouth falling open in amazement.

She was sitting in the middle of a white circular three poster bed so big you could hold an orgy in it. Above her, white ceiling drapes rustled softly in the breeze from the half-open window.

On the bed beside her was a cardkey and a note. The note read:

*Hope you are OK. Donimo helped me carry you back to your cabin. He even cleaned up your puke - think you've made a fiend there.*

*Maev*

*PS Don't be late for lunch.*

Lunch. Ah. Bernice picked up the cardkey and glanced at her watch. When was lunch supposed to be? Whenever it was, chances were she was already late and everyone was on to coffee and mints.

Bernice bounced to the side of the bed and hopped on to the deep-pile carpet.

She stood up, and groaned as her stomach heaved slightly. Goddess, not again - but it was only a rumble of hunger. Her stomach felt cavernously empty.

She looked round the room - her 'cabin', she had to remind herself. It was about twice the size of all her college rooms knocked into one, and it looked even bigger because

everything was decorated in white. The furniture, the ceiling-drapes – all white. From the large picture window Bernice could see the wide expanse of the sea. She had to look hard to see the line which separated ocean from sky. If she concentrated, she could just about feel the motion of the ship, a gentle, subliminal swaying.

An archway led off to the left. Bernice walked through inquisitively. She found herself in a room tiled in light-blue baked clay, with pot plants on pillars and white-painted wrought-iron chairs. There was a sink, a lavatory, a bidet and a shower unit. The centrepiece was a sunken bath the size of a small swimming pool.

Bernice felt the urge to strip and bathe right there and then. Better to be very late, clean and fresh than a little late and whiffy. She sat down at the edge of the bath and twisted the large golden tap. It wouldn't budge. She heaved with both hands, and it gave suddenly with a creak of protest. There was a groan from somewhere under the floor, the tap gave a shudder and a noise that sounded like a painful fart, and a stream of brown water dribbled on to the mosaic on the bottom of the bath.

Swearing, she stripped off her sweaty T-shirt and trousers and washed as best she could in the senile dribble she eventually coaxed from the sink taps.

She was beginning to get the measure of this place. It looked superficially plush and expensive, but close up, it was falling to bits.

'Luxury ship, my ten tiny toes. ' The captain was going to hear about her lack of bath. Oh yes, he was.

Let's face it, he was probably going to be able to smell it, too.

Bernice ran along the corridor, clad in a hurriedly donned light ochre summer dress and sandals. When she reached the door of the dining hall, she found it was closed. Ha. She always felt a sense of impish exhilaration when she was late for a social event. She gripped the golden handle and took a deep breath, practicing her most charmingly innocent smile.



She opened the door and peeped round. Wow. Another big, impressive room. Bernice reckoned the hall could comfortably hold at least three hundred assorted beings. It was richly carpeted in an oceanic pattern of swirling blue and greens. Its two end walls were of stripped pine, adorn with floor-to-ceiling portraits in oils of ancient Earth ships such as the *Mary Rose*, the *Matthew*, the *Beagle*, the *SS Great Britain*, the *QE2*, and even, Bernice was slightly alarmed to see, the *Titanic*. The outer walls were made entirely of glass, showing a sweeping panorama of sea and sky.

There was a long table in the middle of the room, seating about twenty people, most of whom had stopped eating and were looking at her. The table was laden with a thick white tablecloth, pale-blue Sytan china crockery and a lot of shiny silver cutlery. Pale-blue flowers stood in conical vases, and silver candlesticks held unlit tapers of a similar shade. The captain had certainly pushed the boat out, so to speak. She smiled uneasily as she caught the captain's eye, his fork halfway to his mouth.

'Sorry I'm late. Again,' she said lamely. She walked over to the table, ignoring everyone except Maeve, who was frowning in mock-censure and tapping her watch.

Bernice sat down next to her friend. 'Hello, Maeve Thanks for the note.'

'No problem,' said Maeve, sipping a glass of orange juice. Bernice noticed that Donimo was sitting diagonally opposite her, in conversation with the captain. Cleaned up her puke, had he? Bernice idly wondered what else he would do for her - and whether she would want him to.

She grabbed a glass of water and a roll. Despite her hunger, it was all she felt she could handle after her unfortunate experience on deck,

'Welcome, Professor Summerfield,' said the captain, raising his glass of mineral water. 'I trust you are feeling better?'

'Yes, I am, thanks. Think I've found my sea-legs now.'

The captain laughed, and Donimo joined in.

'My bath taps didn't bloody work,' she whispered to Maeve.

'Mine did. Had a fine long soak.'

‘Cow,’ whispered Bernice, and munched her roll, looking around. ‘Where are the Saraani, then?’

‘Their eating habits are a little different from ours,’ Maeve told her. ‘Their Khulayn is supposed to be here to say a few words, but there’s no sign of him yet.’

‘What’s a Khulayn when it’s at home?’

‘It’s a Saraani term. Doesn’t really have an equivalent in our language. Sort of high priest or bishop. He’s very holy.’

The main course arrived. It was served by rather young-looking humanoids in blue uniforms, who Bernice wasn’t surprised to discover were students earning a bit of holiday money.

Having eaten her bread roll with no ill effects, Bernice ate some moyan beans in a noncurried sauce, washed down by mineral water. Pretty bland fare, but at least it filled her up and stopped her feeling queasy.

The other professors and crew were sitting further along the table. Bernice recognized among them Hugh Southernay, the ocean-bed chap, a cheerful-looking little old man; the climatologist Martine Ingerskjold, a striking-looking blonde her fifties; and Hamilton Smith, a rather sour-looking thin man of Bernice’s age. His specialty was alien-human interaction and integration, and Bernice suspected him of hitching a free hol just as she was - though by the permanent scowl his face, he didn’t seem to be enjoying it.

Next to Smith sat a dark-haired man Bernice didn’t recognize. He kept glancing over at Maeve, and Bernice was about to ask her if she knew him, when the captain tapped his glass with a fork.

‘If everyone will kindly move their chairs to face the far wall, we can begin the briefing.’

Bernice was facing the wrong way so she had to move her chair round. As she was doing this, a hologrammatic map appeared, obscuring the portraits of the *Matthew* and the *Mary Rose*. At the same time, the ceiling lights dimmed and the windows pigmented dark.

Bernice was impressed. No blown bulbs - yet.

The captain got up from the table and went to stand to the right of the map. Bernice recognized the nine islands which made up St Oscar's at the top of the screen. From the islands, a green line ran in a curve, ending in a blinking cursor which indicated the location of the *Lorelei*. Bernice was surprised to see how far from St Oscar's they had come already.

The captain filled them in on the basic purpose of the voyage, with much flowery praise of the *Lady of Lorelei* and many grateful references to the absent Saraani, then smiled at Maeve. 'Now Professor Ruthven will tell us a little more about our Saraani benefactors.'

Maeve stood up. 'Good afternoon, everyone. I will act as liaison between all of you and the Saraani. They've been given the greenhouse area for the duration of the voyage. I must emphasize that they value their privacy, and so do I. The revolution on their homeworld has left them badly shaken up - they are, in effect, refugees. So I want this pilgrimage to go as smoothly as possible for them.'

Everyone was looking at Maeve, including the dark-haired man. But whilst most people's expressions were of mild interest, this man's gaze showed more than that. What was it? Bernice noticed that he was slowly gnashing his teeth; she could see his jaws working.

And Maeve was doing her best not to look at him.

What *was* going on?

Maeve was still talking, and Bernice could hear the unnatural tension in her voice. 'Naturally, you're all curious about the Saraani. I understand that. They're a little-known alien race; hardly anything is known about their life cycle or religion. But I must ask you to stem your curiosity, at least for a few days. Once we are further into the pilgrimage, they may consent to see you. But you must come to me first.'

Professor Smith spoke up. 'So effectively the greenhouse area is out of bounds?' His voice was flat and slightly irritating.

Maeve nodded emphatically. 'For the meantime, yes. Any more questions?'

There were none, and Maeve sat back down.

'Very concise, Maeve,' said Bernice. She got a tense smile in return. Bernice had never seen her this worked up before. And she was sure that Maeve's speech had been meant to be longer than that.

But the captain seemed happy enough. 'Thank you, Professor Ruthven,' he said, with one of his most paternal smiles. 'Now, the Saraani have wholly funded this trip, and we are proud to offer them the facilities of the *Lady of Lorelei*.'

Bernice groaned. He had a glint in his eye which probably meant he was going to launch into another eulogy about his beloved vessel, but thankfully he didn't. Instead he asked Professor Southernay to talk about his sea-bed scanning project, and then returned to his seat at the head of the table.

Professor Southernay stood up and smiled round at everyone. He began talking, hesitantly at first, but with growing enthusiasm as he warmed to his subject. His speech was obviously going to be a good deal longer than Maeve's.

Bernice wasn't listening. She was looking at the dark-haired man, who was now staring unconcernedly into space. She nudged Maeve. 'Hey - who is that chap?'

Maeve pouted. 'Nobody,' she said with force.

'That's Dr. Atvaile. Biogeneticist,' said Donimo. He smiled at Bernice.

'From St Oscar's?'

Donimo nodded.

Well, that figured. He had to be a doctor of something. 'What's he doing here?' said Maeve.

'He's been commissioned to study Saraani biology,' said Donimo, apparently oblivious to Maeve's feelings.

Maeve's eyes and mouth widened. 'What?'

'Hey! What's the problem?' whispered Bernice.

Maeve snorted. 'Why didn't he tell me he'd be here?'

Ah. Bernice guessed it. 'Maeve, is Dr Arvaile's first name Brion, by any chance?'

'Yes,' said Maeve through gritted teeth.

‘Oh no,’ said Bernice, looking at Arvaile and then back at Maeve. She felt sorry for her friend. What else could spoil

Maeve’s holiday more than the unexpected appearance of her estranged husband? Bernice’s own problems with Jason had taught her well enough that the words ‘holiday’ and ‘husband’ simply didn’t belong in the same sentence. Or even the same dictionary.

Bernice realized that Professor Southernay had, stopped speaking and was staring over at the door.

So was everyone else.

Bernice turned, and couldn’t take her eyes away from the figure standing framed in the doorway. It was a strange and beautiful creature. Its most striking feature was its head, teardrop-shaped with pearly skin reflecting pinks, blues and yellows. Long, sharp horns swept back from the crown, the largest at least half a metre long. On each side of a short snout was a large, bright-green eye. Its neck was covered in looser, leathery skin, like a lizard’s, and on either side were black slits, like gills, which hissed as air was drawn in then expelled. Its chest was broad, its waist was narrow, and it had long arms, of the same pearly texture as the head, ending in clawed hands. On its clawed feet were complicated-looking sandals. It wore a flowing black cape studded with tiny jewels which glittered as brightly as the silverware on the table. Under the cape Bernice could see tightfitting leggings and a jerkin of a silky burnished gold material. ,

It surveyed the assembled humans quietly for a moment, then strode from the door over to the table, and turned to face them. It was very tall. Its horns almost touched the netting which hung from the ceiling.

The captain stood up. ‘Welcome, Khulayn. We are honoured that you could visit our inaugural briefing.’

So, that’s a Saraani, thought Bernice.

The Khulayn spoke. For such a large creature, its voice was quiet and musical, flowing like silken water.

‘I thank the people of Dellah for offering us sanctuary. We are very pleased with this ocean-going machine.’

The captain’s smile widened.

‘Bet their plumbing works,’ muttered Bernice.

Maeve gave her a sharp glance, and Bernice decided that she’d better shut up.

As the alien spoke, she became aware of a secondary tone in its voice - a low humming which rose and fell with the cadences of its speech. She realized that it was coming from the creature’s ‘gills’.

We look forward to consecrating our shrine on your planet.’

And that was it. The Khulayn bowed, and then stalked out of the hall.

Dammit, his speech had been even shorter than Maeve’s. Secretive wasn’t the word.

The door closed behind the Saraani and there was a moment silence, broken by the captain. ‘And now, Professor Southernay, if you would be so kind to continue with your presentation?’

Like everywhere else on the *Lady of Lorelei*, the bar was large and initially impressive. It was furnished in Earth retro style, all dark-red vinyl, chrome and mirrors. A good-sized dance floor took up the middle of the room, with chairs and glass-topped tables arranged around the black-carpeted edge. There was even a mirrorball hanging from the ceiling.

The jukebox, to Bernice’s dismay (but not to her surprise), wasn’t working. And it certainly wasn’t an original.

The place was empty except for Bernice and Maeve and the other St Oscar professors, who had all retired there after the briefing session. Of the students, there was no sign. They’d even had to serve their own drinks. Bernice was knocking back a long, cool glass of beer... Well, she could dream. It was only ginger beer.

Conversation had turned inevitably to the Saraani.

‘The only thing that is known for sure,’ Maeve was saying, ‘is that they have an incredibly short lifetime, by our standards.’

‘How short?’ asked Professor Smith.

‘Ten years,’ said Maeve quietly.

Professor Ingerskjold's mascaraed eyes widened, but Bernice wasn't surprised. She'd encountered enough alien races not to be surprised. But still - it was a very short life.

'Ten years,' said Professor Ingerskjold, lighting up a cigarette. 'It's nothing! I'm over five times that old - just - and I consider myself to be way less than halfway through my life.'

'There must be something in their biology to compensate for this,' said Professor Southernay. 'But as I am not a biologist, I have no idea what.'

'I tell you who would know,' said Professor Smith. 'Dr Arvaile.' He clicked his fingers and stood up, as if he were about to go off and fetch Arvaile. He didn't seem to notice the dark look Maeve was giving him.

'Thank you, Hamilton,' said Bernice coldly.

He blinked at her, confused, and sat down again.

The conversation continued, but Maeve had grown quiet and withdrawn. Her brown eyes sought out Bernice's and their message was plain: get me out of here.

'Excuse me,' said Bernice to the others. 'Professor Ruthven and I need to have a chat.' So saying, she and Maeve retired to a private booth across the room.

Maeve looked sullen, like a chastised child. Bernice hated seeing her like this. Hated what relationship problems did to a bright person like Maeve.

She decided to give her the standard Summerfield girl-power pep-talk, radio-edit version: 'Maeve, you must stop moping over your husband. I know what it's like, you feel like you can never be free of the man - but you're strong, I know you are, and you have a lot more to offer.'

Maeve folded her arms and looked at Bernice from beneath her remarkable eyebrows. 'You don't know the full story.'

'Well, now's the chance to tell me.'

Maeve shook her head. 'You wouldn't understand. It's all bound up in what I was brought up to believe. My religion. You're an atheist, how can you understand?'

Oh no. Here it was - religion coming between them. She had hoped it wouldn't. Now it was her job to make sure it

wouldn't. 'Maeve,' she said, looking steadily into the other woman's eyes, 'just because I don't believe the some things as you, doesn't mean I won't listen. I won't mock you for your belief.'

Maeve sighed. 'I often wish I could be without it. Maybe if I wasn't a Marunian I would never have split up with Brion. Come to think of it, I would never have married him either - you know, being a rebel and all that.'

'Hang on,' said Bernice. 'I'm lost here. I think you'd better fill me in on a few details about Marunianism.'

Maeve shrugged. 'It's a bit of a Luddite religion. really. The nearest thing to Marunianism is early Protestantism - well, that's where it sprang from, a couple of hundred years ago. That was when the mainstream Protestant Church accepted all science - including genetic engineering. A Scottish Protestant, Marunia Lennox, opposed this, and set up her own faith which *rejected* all science. Bit extreme, eh? But they got loads of converts, especially after the plagues. Over the years, it became a bit more liberal, and now Marunians only reject genetic engineering, vivisection, experimentation for the sake of it. Hence the symbol -' she held out the little blue hand icon for Bernice to see more clearly '- the point being that we have four fingers and a thumb on each hand, and that's what God intended. Even if it is possible for science to give us extra digits, it shouldn't be done.'

'But surely it's already been done,' argued Bernice. 'Without genetic science, all the major cancers and blood disorders would still be around! And what about wisdom teeth? They were genetically edited out of the human race before I was born. Not everything God intended is actually any use, you know!'

'That was my problem with the faith,' said Maeve, nodding. 'It was too restrictive. Hard-line Maruniazis would let children die rather than allow the most basic genetic editing in the womb.' Maeve sighed. 'I had a rough time with my parents. I left home, went to university, studied comparative religion, came here, got married to Brion. A *genetic engineer*. I



thought I was being a rather forward-thinking little rebel, you know, embracing the enemy.' She sighed 'What a mistake.'

'So, you're separated?'

'Yes. I thought it was just something my parents believed. I didn't realize that I believed it too. Not until -' She shrugged. 'I told him that I needed time to think, try to reconcile my faith with my marriage. We had a row - a hell of a row - and I haven't seen him since. It's as though he vanished right off the face of Denali. And now he's *here!*'

Bernice realized somewhat belatedly that Maeve's marital problems bore very little relation to her own. 'Perhaps he'd popped back to - where was it he came from?'

'Visphok,' said Maeve. 'No. He wouldn't have gone back there. When he left he was a refugee - he had to claim political asylum to stay on Dellah.'

A refugee, like the Saraani. Dellah certainly seemed to be the place for refugees at the moment.

'Now Visphok's in the middle of a revolution,' Maeve went on. 'The planet's an early colony, settled by Slavs and Russians. They've always been hot on genetic purity, the "Visphoi Ideal" - until now. I think Brion's side has won - that is, the regime he ran away from has been overthrown - but I'm still sure he wouldn't have gone back. He said he never wanted to see the place again.'

Are you sure? People get homesick. Perhaps if he knew that the situation had changed -'

Maeve shook her head. 'No. I know him. He'd have thrown himself into his work. That's his life - his whole life. His godless genetic science. That's why I couldn't stand it any more. He just didn't seem to understand that I could have objections - that I had a right to -' She broke off, her face flushed with anger. 'And now he's studying Saraani biology right under my nose.' Maeve hopped off her stool.

'Where are you going?'

'I'm gonna call him, and have it out with him.'

'Have what out with him?'

'He can't study the Saraani! They won't let him! If they won't let me -'

Bernice reached out and grabbed Maeve by her bony shoulders. 'Maeve, be rational. They're obviously "letting him" study them, or he wouldn't be here. '

'I'd still like to know how he managed to swing it.'

'And another thing, we're all in the same boat. Literally. It's big, I know, but not that big. Do you really want your relationship with the Saraani fouled up by your arguments with him?'

Maeve sat back down on the stool. 'I haven't spoken to him since we split up. I still don't know what I feel about him. I don't know what I would say if I had to talk to him. You're right, we'd probably end up having another row.' She chewed her bottom lip pensively. 'Perhaps it is best if I avoid him for a while longer. '

'You know it makes sense. Think things through first.'

A pause, and then a grin and a flicker of eyebrows. 'Oh, for some whisky now.'

'Quite,' said Bernice. 'Ginger beer?'

Maeve got up from her stool again. 'No, I'd better go and check on the Saraani. They seemed a bit freaked out by the - there aren't any oceans on Saraanis.'

Bernice watched her friend go, and swigged the last of her ginger beer. A giddy feeling overwhelmed her - what was it? As it was going to be a week before they even sighted land, there was nothing for her to do. So the feeling must be - freedom from work. The feeling must be - holiday. It was good. Bernice decided there and then to do nothing but pamper herself for the entire week.

Donimo walked into the bar, a brown bottle in his hand. He saw that Bernice was alone, and came to sit in the place vacated by Maeve. He put the bottle on the table between them.

Bernice looked hopefully at it. 'Admiral's Old?'

'He may well be,' grinned the first mate, 'but this is just apple juice.'

Bernice made a face. 'Pour me some anyway. Where's the cap'n?'

‘On the bridge.’ Donimo poured her drink carefully, as if he were dispensing medicine. ‘This ship virtually runs itself, but he likes to be there.’

‘What about the rest of the crew?’

‘There’s only about twenty of us - a navigation officer, engineers, maintenance folk. All the serving staff are students.’ He sipped the apple juice, and grimaced.

‘I’d noticed.’

‘This is the first time the *Lady*’s sailed in a year. She was on the verge of being scrapped. Going well, isn’t she?’

Bernice smiled sweetly. ‘Doesn’t sound like a very busy ship. What did you do before?’

‘After Emyrean Leisure went bust last year, most of the crew got jobs on space liners or went back to their home-worlds. All except me and the captain. He was heartbroken. I couldn’t bear to leave him so I got a job at a Goll naval base, and worked part time keeping this tub Bristol fashion.’

‘You just about managed it - apart from my bath,’ said Bernice.

‘What’s wrong with it?’

‘Nothing comes out of the taps that remotely resembles water. More like weak dribbly gravy.’

Donimo frowned, his sun-tanned forehead creasing like tree bark. ‘Oh, I’ll have a look at that. I’m pretty good with plumbing.’ His eyes glinted at her.

‘I’ll bet you are,’ said Bernice coldly. She didn’t want to get flirty with this man until she was sure that there was more to him than swarthy good looks and a love of innuendo. ‘Why did you stay on Dellah with the captain? It’s not as if you’re married to him - or are you?’

Donimo’s face clouded. ‘He helped me out once - got me a job on a plush space liner.’ His voice had grown soft and serious. ‘Then something happened which meant he could never leave Dellah.’

Bernice wondered what it was. ‘The poor man.’

Donimo smiled. 'He loves the *Lady of Lorelei*. It broke his heart when they decided to scrap her. This trip means more to him than anything since -'

'Since what?' probed Bernice, then saw Donimo frown and wished she hadn't. 'Sorry, I didn't mean to be nosy.'

'That's OK.' He leant forward across the table. 'But he doesn't like people knowing about it - so all this is just between you and me, right?'

'Right,' said Bernice, raising her glass. She thought there was something admirable, almost noble, about staying behind on a planet for your friend, rather than heading back to the glamour of space.

Donimo raised his glass and they made a toast.

'To the *Lady of Lorelei* and all who sail on her,' said I Donimo solemnly.

Bernice smiled. To a totally uneventful, relaxing cruise.'

## NEW FACE IN HELL

Theo woke up.

He opened his mouth to scream, but he couldn't. Then he realized that he didn't need to, because there was no pain.

No pain, anywhere in his body.

No feeling -

He tried to move, but he couldn't. It was as if his body were encased in glue. All he could do was see - and all he could see

was grey and blurry. There was a source of light above, far above, but his vision was so poor that he couldn't tell if it was sunlight or artificial.

Where was he?

At home on Fenistris? No. He'd left there to go to -

In his room in Goodyear College Hall? No. He'd left there to go to -

In the Witch and Whirlwind? No. He'd left there to go to -  
On the hill. By the bench.

About to be killed.

- *oh Goddess about to be killed by that thing with the gun -  
the gun had been whining and what had happened to him -*

But he wasn't dead. The alien had said he was going to make Theo immortal.

So was this immortality?

He felt calm again, able to assess all the options. He boiled it down to four:

1. Perhaps he was dead, and this was the afterlife. He'd never really thought about it - in fact, he'd made a conscious decision not to think about death or dying until he absolutely had to.

2. Perhaps he was in hospital. Yes, that was likely. Maybe the creature had only injured him, and he had been found unconscious and taken to the St Oscar's infirmary, where he now lay in a coma. In which case: Hello, guys! I'm still here) For Goddess' sake don't tom the machine off yet! I.
3. Perhaps this was still a practical joke by Viler or one of the older students. Unlikely. It was a) too elaborate and b) too weird and c) well, if it was, when he got out of this he would kick whoever's ass was responsible, however big they were.
4. Perhaps something had happened to him that was no totally beyond his comprehension that he had as much hope of understanding it as a gerbil has of understanding the political situation on Troxos 4.

He had to admit that this last option disturbed him.

His vision was clearing now.

He could see - a big space. Metal walls, metal - legs? Tubes? No - more like scaffolding. And in the scaffolding, big glass things. What were they?

Oh, here comes someone - a doctor?

An angel?

Bernice?

He remembered Bernice, and with a sudden jolt of anguish realized that she was the person he wanted to see most. Theo squinted, but he couldn't make out the figure's face.

Whoever it was came right up close to him, and a long, thin arm reached for something next to his head. Theo began to feel fear again. What was this person doing? Then there was a click -

## I NEED PROOF BEFORE BELIEF

Picture Professor Bernice Surprise Summerfield in a bikini. A purple velvet bikini, with gold tassels on the nipples and a big gold star on the crotch.

For this is what she was wearing as she lazed by the ship's swimming pool on a big, comfy inflatable sun lounger.

After Donimo had gone back to the bridge, Bernice had returned to her cabin, intending to have a dip in the pool - the next best thing to a bath. But she remembered then why she'd been late getting on board - she hadn't been able to find her swimsuit. She'd thrown her rucksack on to the bed and emptied it, flinging her clothes on the white carpet until the place looked more like home. Then she opened the mirrored door of the wardrobe opposite the bed to find it empty except for, alone on a hanger, a purple velvet bikini, with gold tassels on the nipples and a big gold star on the crotch.

She had to wear it, of course, because a) she felt sorry for it and b) she was on holiday (even if no one else seemed to be).

So she changed into it, threw a large cardie over the top, and trotted off to the swimming pool - to find the water cold and stagnant, with dead insects floating on the surface. Yes, the pool heating system wasn't working, together with the water-filtering system, the sterilizing system and probably every other bloody system. Donimo would probably be able to help, but she didn't want to ask in case he suggested a spot of skinny-dipping.

Or did she?

Bernice closed her eyes, allowing herself the luxury of fantasy, ignoring the voice of sense and caution in favour of

the voice that said I'm on holiday and I can do what I bloody well like.

Bernice was just about to drift off to sleep when she heard a noise.

A rustling noise, and the sound of something breathing. Bernice gave a yell of alarm and sat upright.

A Saraani stood mere feet away, her bag in its clawed hands, black tongue flicking from between its mandibles.

There was a brief silence.

'What the hell do you think you are doing?'

It just stood there. This one wasn't the Khulayn - its cloak and tunic were blue, not gold and black. There was no elaborate decoration either, just a pair of big gold buttons on either side of the collar.

Suddenly it dropped the bag, scattering its contents across the tiles. It then ran off, blue cloak billowing behind it.

With a shout of indignation, Bernice gave chase.

She lost it a few times around the curves and corners of the superstructure. After a while she realized that it was heading for the stern of the ship, towards the greenhouse. Bernice rounded a corner in time to see the doors of the greenhouse slide shut behind the Saraani's blue cloak.

Bernice hadn't seen the greenhouse before. It was a large, rectangular block of panelled, green-tinted glass with a raised arched centre section. Its centrepiece was a round window almost twenty metres across, divided into sections like the face of a clock, each segment a different colour of stained glass - green, yellow, blue. It looked peaceful and holy - the perfect temporary home for a group of alien pilgrims.

Shame one of them had turned out to be a bag-snatcher.

Bernice ran up to the greenhouse, and pressed the outer door control. She found herself in a small, warm ante-room, bare except for a rack on the wall and a door opposite. She pressed the inner door control and stepped through into another world. A hot, dry world.

Totally bereft of Saraani.

There was no sign even of the one she had been chasing. Confused, Bernice walked a little way along the red-tiled



boulevard which ran through the centre of the greenhouse. On either side, artificial turf stretched in both directions, broken by copses of tall, round-leafed rubbery plants. Could it be hiding in one of these copses?

Bernice walked a little further, the tiles warm against her bare feet. Above, the green-tinted ceiling of the greenhouse curved like a ribbed glass sky. The place looked like a bizarre amalgam of beach, park and botanical garden hothouse. The air smelt vaguely of chemicals, and it was hot: a dry, prickly heat.

Still no Saraani. Where were they? They couldn't all be in their cabins. Goddess, it was hot in here. Bernice was sweating, even in the bikini.

There was a fluttering sound behind her like the pages of a book being rapidly flicked, and she jumped as a butterfly shivered in the air over her head. It was the size of a book, and utterly beautiful, its wings bright orange and burnt brown. It hovered in front of her face, as though it were watching her. Bernice slowly put out her hand for it to land on, but before it had a chance there was a sharp cracking sound, like a whiplash, and the insect was snatched out of the air by a thin black rope. No. Not a rope -

A tongue.

A Saraani stepped into view from behind one of the tall rubbery plants. It was the Saraani that had been rifling through her bag. A fiery wing was briefly visible between its mandibles before it was slurped inside.

Bernice remembered what Maeve had said about Saraani eating habits and was suddenly glad that the aliens hadn't joined them for lunch.

The Saraani reached out a clawed hand and grabbed her shoulder. Its grip was very strong.

'Ow! Do you mind letting go a bit? I don't know if you lot have noticed, but us humans are rather squishy on the outside.'

The Saraani loosened its grip slightly. 'You should not be here.'

‘And you shouldn’t go rooting through my possessions!’ shouted Bernice.

The Saraani cast its head about, its tongue flicking out. ‘The others are at worship. They must not be disturbed!’

‘Why aren’t you with them?’

The Saraani let go of her and stroked its spines, making a clicking noise. ‘I can’t explain!’ it fluted, its gills humming. In what sounded like agitation. ‘You have to leave.’

It turned and walked unsteadily away.

There was definitely something odd about its behaviour, and it was something that Bernice recognized. Something she’d seen a thousand times. And what was that smell from its gills?

Surely not - Aha!

Bernice dodged in front of the Saraani barring its way. ‘You’re drunk.’

The Saraani hummed at her again.

‘You’ve been drinking alcohol - and I thought it was against your reli- Ow!’

It had grabbed her again, and was now forcing her towards the edge of the greenhouse. ‘Let me go!’

It was very strong, and Bernice had no choice but to let herself be dragged towards a door in the glass. She was taken down a short corridor, and into a small room.

The Saraani threw her against the opposite wall and bore down upon her. It was at least a head taller than her, probably very strong, and now she’d made it angry and it was going to kill her.

Bernice backed against the drape-covered wall, her fingers feeling along a shelf behind her, scrabbling for anything she could use against the creature. Her fingers curled round the handle of a - she swung it round in front of her - corkscrew. The Saraani stopped short of her, its hands clinging together in a strangely human gesture of confusion, its snakelike black tongue flicking from between its mandibles.

Bernice looked at the corkscrew she was holding, feeling rather ridiculous. It was a cheap corkscrew, its handle

fashioned out of bulbous blue plastic. She noticed that there was still a cork attached to it. She sniffed the wet end.

Red wine.

Expensive red wine.

Chateau Yquatine.

Bloody hell! Bernice advanced on the Saraani. 'What you doing with *my* wine?'

'Be quiet,' hummed the Saraani.

'Be quiet? No I bloody well won't, I'm going straight to your high priest to tell him all about your little problem!'

'Please don't.'

It sounded so plaintive that Bernice paused halfway to the door. 'All right - I won't. As long as you let me have my drinks back.'

The creature looked visibly relieved, and gestured Bernice to sit down.

Bernice sat on the rather hard bed and watched astounded as the Saraani reached up and unscrewed the end of its front right horn. From the end of the removed piece, a small key protruded. The Saraani used the key to unlock a large white chest.

Inside were Bernice's two bottles of whisky (one opened), her two bottles of Chateau Yquatine (ditto) and a whole load of other bottles.

'Reunited at last,' said Bernice, dragging out the whisky bottles. She passed a bottle to the Saraani, who poured two glasses and passed one to her.

The Saraani dropped a straw into its glass, its mandibles clamping over the end. There was a slurping sound as it drank.

Bernice sipped her whisky. It burnt her mouth and lit a fire all the way down her throat as she swallowed. 'Lovely.'

'It is a nice feeling, isn't it?' said the Saraani, sounding bizarrely childlike.

Bernice laughed. 'My name's Benny,' she said. 'What's yours?'

‘^~~~~~^^^~^~^^^~^~^~~~~~^~~~~~^~~~~~^~^,’  
fluted the Saraani. ‘It roughly translates into your language as “Vilbian”.’

‘How roughly?’

We have a syllabic compression translation system. My name would be sixty syllables long, in your language. The compression allows us to translate our names, and some of our terms which have no equivalent in your language, such as Khulayn.’

‘I see.’

We find your language excessively. harsh. Like your architecture.’

‘Hey, it’s not my planet, I just live here.’ Bernice raised her glass. and Vilbian filled it once more.

Bernice regarded the amber liquid critically. ‘How did you get hold of my booze?’

‘I - liberated it,’ said Vilbian.

Bernice frowned. ‘How liberated?’

‘Simple,’ said Vilbian, screwing his horn back in. ‘Whilst all you humans were at your briefing, I broke into the storeroom and found them. ‘

‘Why? I mean, your religion is supposed to forbid alcohol. And I’ll bet it forbids breaking and entering too.’

Vilbian sat down. ‘After we were exiled from Saraanis, we laid to spend some time at the Freblon waystation. I got lost, and a hirsute mammalian creature forced its attentions on me. It wanted me to purchase some worthless artifacts. I did not want to purchase any worthless artifacts, but I was thirsty and I bought some of the liquid it offered me. It was wonderful. It helped me forget what had happened to us. I knew that there would be some on this ship, all I needed to do was look. ‘

‘So how come you were wandering about ogling ladies in their bikinis?’

Vilbian lowered his head. ‘I have said too much already. We are not supposed to consort with humans, other than Professor Ruthven.’

Bernice suppressed a smile. 'Remember what I'll do if you don't "consort" with me.'

Vilbian hummed through his gills. 'The Khulayn must not know of my liking for alcoholic beverages. It would mean excommunication.'

'So you'd better tell me what you were up to, then.'

'I took rather too much alcohol. I became curious. I ventured out of the greenhouse when the others began worship. I came upon you. I had never seen a human before in such detail. Your anatomy is strange. You have the same number of limbs as us, but that is where the similarity ends. Your skin is soft. You have bones in your mouths. And you are a - female? - which is very interesting. '

Bernice hunched down, feeling oddly embarrassed, although she knew that the Saraani's interest in her could in no way be sexual. Still, she wished she'd brought her cardie. 'Don't you have female Saraani, then? I mean, are you a he or a she?'

'I am Vilbian. We have no gender.' Vilbian waved a claw. 'Use whichever pronoun you feel most comfortable with.'

So, Saraani were neither male nor female. Which raised some interesting questions. Like: 'So how do you reproduce, then?'

'We lay eggs, which are fertilized by the reproductive cells - in our abdomen,' said Vilbian.

Bernice stared at Vilbian. A race without a sex drive. No crushes, no jealousy, no guilt, no orgasms, no wet patches. No fun.

Suddenly Bernice remembered something. 'Your interest in the human form doesn't explain why you were rooting through my bag. '

'I saw something within it. A bottle, which I thought was exotic alien liquor,' said Vilbian. 'It turned out to be something called Factor 15 Suntan Lotion. I'm sorry if I startled you.'

Bernice laughed. 'That's quite all right.'

They sipped their drinks for a while.

'Do you believe?' asked Vilbian suddenly.

‘In what?’

‘In the GodUniverse.’

‘What’s that when it’s at home?’

It is what we Saraani worship. God and the Universe are one and the same. Our bodies are vessels for our minds. Our minds are tools for worship.’

Bernice began to feel the same unease she sometimes had with Maeve - that, somehow, these religious people were right and that life was pointless without belief. It was an uncomfortable feeling, that her whole life and moral viewpoint was irrelevant.

Bernice brushed aside the feeling. She knew it was false, knew that it was just that feeling that zealots used to the weak and gullible. And Bernice was neither weak no gullible, no sirree. ‘I am an atheist, yes, but a humanist. I believe in the power of the individual. The goodness of human - and alien - nature.’

Vilbian hissed. ‘You sound like a Renaissance.’

Renaissance? What was he on about? ‘A what?’

‘A Renaissance. An unbeliever. A heretic.’ Vilbian sipped more whisky. ‘There have always been atheist groups on Saraanis, but until recently, heresy has been - unpopular. people realized that they could be free of the duty responsibility of religion, more and more of them renounced their beliefs, denied the spiritual side of our nature - even of Holy Transference! Now we are in the minority. These *Renaissants*, as they like to be called, deposed us.’ Vilbian’s gills hissed, filling the room with the tang of whisky. ‘We are exiles, doomed to live out our lifetimes on an alien world.’

Bernice had many questions, but she wasn’t sure which ones would be safe to ask. She picked on the easiest. ‘What’s Holy Transference?’

Vilbian put down his glass, and straight away Bernice on that she’d asked the wrong question. ‘I have to go back to the greenhouse,’ he said briskly.

‘But what’s -’

‘There is no more time to talk. ‘

Bernice grabbed her bottles, placing them carefully in the black bag Donimo had used.

‘Quickly. You must leave.’

‘All right, all right. ‘ Bernice slid the last bottle into place And hefted the bag. The bottles clinked together in a most satisfying way.

Vilbian guided her out of his room and back along the corridor and into the greenhouse. His movements were jerky and hurried, and he kept casting worried glances towards the other end of the greenhouse.

‘The others will return from worship at any moment now,’ said Vilbian, his gills thrumming.

Bernice remembered guiltily that the greenhouse was out of bounds, and that Maeve would be pretty annoyed to find out that Bernice had been there.

Well, with any luck, she wouldn’t.

Vilbian all but shoved Bernice towards the lobby doors.

The Saraani whose name translated as Mirrium gazed up into the sky, his neck muscles stretching in a pleasing way, widening his gills, thus making breathing easier.

The sky on this planet was so beautiful. So - blue Mirrium had never seen blue sky before. The sky on Saraanis was yellow.

Thinking of Saraanis made Mirrium sad. It made all of them sad, because they would probably never see their homeworld again.

Still, he could get used to this new colour.

Whatever colour the sky was, above it, always, was space, thought Mirrium. If you could fly straight up, in a straight line for ever, the blue would gradually darken to black, black of space, the stars cold, sharp points of light. The planet already far, far below, the blue (or yellow) band of planet’s sky the merest, infinitesimal membrane, a shroud for a grain of sand. And further up? You would pass the planet’ sun, move out of the system and beyond the local cluster until eventually you would leave the galaxy, and all galaxies and be floating in the naked Universe which is God.

God is the Universe, murmured Mirrium, and the Universe is God. They are one, they are the same. Life is but a reflection. The Universe is God, and God is the Universe.

Miriam heard the descending hoot from the Khulayn which meant the end of the ceremony. He removed his gaze from the sky, to see his fellow worshippers in front of him. Mirrium was nearest the portal, so it was his job to lead them back inside. He turned and faced the greenhouse, blinking. It was difficult to focus on the things of mere existence, after having stared at God for so long. He stepped over the lip of the greenhouse, and started down the steps. He could hear the others' footsteps behind him as they stepped into line.

Mirrium concentrated on the steps. There were no steps on Saraanis. Ramps and elevators, but nothing as complicated as this. Mirrium did not like human architecture. Everything cramped, all corners and straight lines. His cabin was far too small.

Halfway down the steps, Mirrium saw Vilbian at the other side of the greenhouse - talking to a human.

Vilbian. Of course. He had not been at worship, pleading fatigue. But he couldn't be that tired if he was talking to aliens. Mirrium gave a hoot of disapproval.

Someone prodded him in the back. He turned. It was Zyquill, a pilgrim who had come from Saraanis without friends, without my possessions. Mirrium had befriended him, feeling it his duty to look after one who had even less than he. Zyquill had returned his friendship, but in a rather reserved way which Mirrium put down to the pain of loss. Zyquill's skin had a bluish tint where Mirrium's was green, sand-yellow horns to Mirrium's bone-white.

'What is it, Mirrium? Forgotten how to use these steps?'

'No,' said Mirrium, and pointed. As Zyquill emitted an outraged hiss, the human walked out the door of the entrance lobby. Vilbian immediately began to run along the boulevard towards them.

'Humans are not allowed in here without permission,' said Mirrium. 'What was Vilbian doing?'



More Saraani had entered the greenhouse, and Mirrium and Zyquill moved down the steps to let them descend. Vilbian was now at the foot of the stairs, arms raised in welcome, tongue flicking agitatedly all over his face.

It was too late, thought Mirrium. Others had seen what had happened. All the Saraani pilgrims were now standing in a ragged circle around Vilbian, murmuring to each other, the ceremony forgotten.

‘humans should be reminded of the sanctity of this voyage

‘Vilbian will be punished –

‘revolution. Will we ever find any peace? -’

The chattering disturbed Mirrium. How easily the mood of worship was destroyed.

The Khulayn hooted angrily, and everyone fell silent.

Mirrium felt a warm glow inside - authority was being exercised, and not before time.

The Khulayn stepped up to Vilbian. ‘Why were you talking to the human? What was it doing here?’

‘I found it looking around, and was merely asking it to leave.’

A human invading their sacred place - on the very first day of the pilgrimage? A fluting of alarm ran through the Saraani. Mirrium was shocked.

The Khulayn hooted again for silence. ‘This is disquieting, but, pilgrims, do not let it affect you. Perhaps this human was overcome by curiosity. If so, the humans must be reminded of our need for privacy. I shall speak to Professor Ruthven.’

Mirrium felt relieved. Strange as humans were, Professor Ruthven was one he knew they could trust. The Khulayn had assured them it was so, many times.

‘Return to your duties. We will conduct another ceremony when the sun sets.’ The Khulayn walked down the boulevard.

Yes, thought Mirrium. The ceremony of the setting sun. All is as it should be.

## BETWEEN A MAN AND A WOMAN

Bernice plonked the black bag containing her drink on her bed. It was good to have them back. Now she'd be able to really enjoy her holiday.

She slid the bottles out one by one, thinking of clever places she could hide them. Down the loo? No. Too undignified. How about - hang on, what's that? There was a little bottle, right at the bottom of the bag. Bernice tipped the bag up and it rolled on to her bed - a small green bottle with a White label. 'Brettellian Potato Spirit'. Sounded dubious in the extreme. Must be one of Vilbian's stash, mixed up with hers somehow.

Bernice shivered. Time to get out of this bikini. She looked down to where Vilbian had gripped her arm. There'd be bruises in the morning.

She walked over to her pile of clothes. En route, she noticed something propped up against the mirror on her dressing table. It was an envelope, from which Bernice pulled out an oblong piece of card with embossed lettering and a fancy border. It read:

*Captain Dieter Fontana requests the company of  
Professor Bernice Summerfield  
at a banquet to celebrate the  
Lady of Londai's  
glorious resurrection  
in the Banquet Hall G'Dede 20:00 hrs*

and on the other side there was a hand-written note:

*I've fixed your bath.*

*- Donimo*

Excellent, thought Bernice. Frock time!

She went to rifle out something scorching. She felt in emerald-green mood tonight. Or maybe red. Yes. Bernice picked out a long, red frock, with lace-up sides and plunging neckline, and plenty of frills.

Perfect.

And it seemed that her bath was now - oh, bliss! - fully functional.

This holiday was definitely hotting up.

Vilbian sat in his cabin, sipping vodka from a bottle through a straw, thinking about the human whose name translated as 'Benny'. He still found it incredible that some races had two sexes - even more in some cases. It must make reproduction very difficult. It would mean that they had to get together physically, in some way, to fertilize their eggs. Exactly how they did this, Vilbian had no idea. Perhaps he could ask the human Benny about it.

Vilbian shook his head as he became aware of an itch below his front right horn. A very definite, specific kind of itch. An itch that was a signal.

Vilbian put down the bottle, reached under his bed and dragged out a rough oval lump of purple stone. It was a hollowed-out rock from the Holy Mountain of Saraan, and contained incense and potions, for use in various rituals.

And much more besides.

He reached up and unscrewed the tip of his front right horn. The itch went away at once. He used the key - the same key which kept the secret of his alcoholic drinks safe - to open the rock. Inside, as well as Vilbian's devotional items, were many decidedly undevotional items of technology, some of which Vilbian hoped he would never have to use.

In **the** rough underside of the lid was glued a tiny screen, upon which small green letters blinked a message:

## V TO DELLAH EST FIVE DAYS

Vilbian shut and locked the chest, and slid it under his bed. He sat on the bed, and flicked his tongue out a few times.

*Five days...*

He picked up the bottle of vodka and began to drink.

The banquet hall was plush, wood-panelled and big. Big enough for the six chandeliers which hung like crystal-line space stations from the ornately decorated ceiling. Big enough to accommodate a disturbing number of ersatz Pre-Raphaelite frescoes in which ivory-limbed red-haired young maidens were doing things with lutes and each other. At one end of the room was a black-and-white-tiled dance floor and a stage with dusty red curtains. A grand piano stood in one corner, a scale model of the *Lady of Lorelei* in another. Tall white columns ran along the centre of the room, and between two of these was the dining table. Recorded waltz music added the final touch of decadent grandeur. Dancing was promised later. All that was missing was the odd drink or two - but Bernice didn't mind. She had her Chateau Yquatine safely hidden in her cabin. And there was always the bottle of Brettellian Potato Spirit in her faux-leather clutch purse. If she ever dared try it.

Bernice contemplated the huge repast before her. There were stuffed avocados, roasted bananas in chocolate, braised fowl's wings in vinaigrette, several kinds of Delhthan squid marinated in a variety of sauces, *aeufs Aldebarenne*, schooners of vegetables, curried moyan beans (again) - and those were just the starters.

With a sideways glance at Maeve, Bernice put her hands together. 'For what we are about to receive, may God line our stomachs with lead.'

This elicited a frown from Maeve, but Bernice ignored it and tucked in. This lot was staying down, whatever happened. And thanks to Doc Shanley's Anti-Heave Pills, a few of which she'd taken earlier, her sea-sickness seemed to have gone away.

Donimo was sitting exactly opposite her, receiving the full benefit of her cleavage (such as it was). He had changed into a pair of leather trousers and a big white shirt, so that he resembled an extra firm *Pirates of Penzance*. The captain was still wearing his uniform - he probably slept in it.

Bernice knew that it was none of her business, but she couldn't help wondering what dark event blighted the captain's past. Perhaps Donimo would tell her, in his own time.

Professors Southernay and Smith were eagerly discussing something, to the evident boredom of Professor Ingerskjold who was wearing an emerald-green frock. Bernice thanked the Frock Fairy that she had chosen the red one.

Bernice couldn't help but notice Maeve's subdued mood. Usually, at social occasions like this, she was as bright and bubbly as the best of them, but this evening she was quiet, even standoffish. Bernice put this down to the presence of her husband, who was sitting at the far end of the table next to Professor Ingerskjold, in a striking (for him) white shirt.

Bernice could hear Maeve muttering. 'I bought that shirt for him. He's got the fashion sense of a typical Visphoi. Why is he wearing it? If he's trying to get back with me...' The sentence remained unfinished and was followed by an ominous intake of breath.

'Maeve, is something bothering you?' whispered Bernice. 'Brion giving you trouble?'

Maeve smiled, but her eyes were serious. 'He'll always give me trouble.'

Arvaile was talking and laughing with the other professors, seemingly oblivious to the effect he was having on his wife. His eyes met Bernice's briefly, then he looked away, momentarily stone-faced.

Never get involved in someone else's relationship war, thought Bernice. You'll only get caught in the crossfire.

'Actually, it's you who's causing me the most trouble at the moment,' said Maeve.

'Why? What have I done?' Bernice felt herself going red. What was it with Maeve? She was smaller and younger and

less experienced in many ways than Bernice but she could still make Bernice feel like a naughty schoolgirl.

‘I had a visit from the Khulayn earlier today. He told me that you had been snooping around. What did you think you were doing, Bernice?’

‘Ah,’ said Bernice. ‘Yes. Well, I was going to tell you about that.’

‘I’ll bet you were. You know that you must go through me if you want to talk to the Saraani.’

‘Well, I’m sorry,’ said Bernice. She told Maeve about her encounter with Vilbian - leaving out the bit about the drink, of course.

Maeve’s frown deepened. ‘That’s not what the Khulayn told me. He said you were spying on them.’

‘Well, he’s lying. I just rushed in after Vilbian without thinking.’

Maeve shook her head. ‘The Khulayn cannot lie.’

‘My experience would seem to indicate otherwise,’ said Bernice icily, feeling her temper rising.

But Maeve wasn’t listening to her. ‘The next time you want to go nosing around the Saraani, ask me. Or rather, don’t ask me, because I’m not going to let you.’

For the first time in their relationship, Bernice felt real anger towards Maeve. Why the hell should she believe the Khulayn? She’d certainly underestimated the strength of Maeve’s determination to protect the Saraani.

Bernice knew that there was no point in arguing. ‘Scuse me, I’m just off to powder my nose,’ she said.

\* \* \*

In the ladies’ room, Bernice stood at the sink, breathing hard, glaring at herself in the mirror and trying to stall her anger with reason and logic.

Maeve’s jumpy about the Saraani. Stands to reason she’d react the way she did. And I should really have thought before barging into the greenhouse - Maeve made it quite clear that the place was out of bounds.

Perhaps a drink will help.

Bernice took the bottle of potato spirit from her clutch purse and unscrewed the lid. She sniffed it cautiously. It was odourless.

That was always a bad sign.

She took an exploratory sip.

God, it was horrible! It made her eyes water, her throat rasp like a terminal asthmatic and her knees crumble like shortbread. It took a few minutes of hanging on to the sink with her forehead pressed against the mirror before Bernice felt any better.

She sniffed, wheezed, wiped her nose and left the room.

Donimo was waiting outside, leaning on the wood-panelled wall opposite.

Bernice instinctively put a hand over her cleavage. 'What are you doing here?' she blurted out.

'Waiting for you.'

'Why?'

He leant closer. 'I need to talk to you, about alcoholic beverages. '

'A subject very close to my heart.' And - currently - her stomach, lungs, liver, kidneys and lower bowel. Not to mention her brain. Could he smell it on her breath?

'And mine, at the moment.' He offered his arm. 'Shall we walk?'

She took hold of the proffered appendage and they went away from the banquet hall, and out on to the open deck. The night was mild, the sky full of sherbet and candy-coloured stars.

Aha. Perhaps he intends to seduce me under the starlight. 'What was it you wanted to say?'

'Your confiscated alcohol has gone missing,' said Donimo, his voice suddenly official. 'You don't know anything about this, do you, Professor Summerfield?'

'Well, I didn't nick it,' said Bernice truthfully. 'Why do you think I did?'

'You're the obvious suspect.'

‘Thanks a bunch! I don’t even know where it was kept. If you want to be friends with me, kindly stop acting the petty official!’

Donimo coughed in embarrassment. ‘I’m sorry. Just doing my job. I have to ask everyone. I’ve talked to the other professors, and the crew, and it can hardly be the Saraani, can it?’

‘Well, no.’ If she told him the truth, he probably wouldn’t believe it.

‘Exactly.’ Donimo nodded, his black hair shining in the moonlight. He looked over his shoulder, then leant towards her conspiratorially. He smelt of aftershave, which struck Bernice as charmingly old-fashioned. ‘I had hoped it was you. Hoped we could share it, but -’ he shrugged ‘- as you didn’t, we can’t.’

‘Well,’ said Bernice, ‘there was one bottle you missed.’ She slid the potato spirit from her purse and waved it in front of his nose.

Donimo took the bottle from her and examined it. ‘How did you get this on board?’

Bernice found herself unable to think of a convincing lie and settled for mystery instead. ‘Don’t ask.’

Donimo shrugged, opened the bottle and took a swig. Bernice watched his reaction with interest, but other than a quick shake of the head, Donimo seemed unaffected by the potent brew.

She took the bottle back and had another sip. Still horrible, but at least it was getting her pissed. Maybe even pissed enough to...

Or maybe not. The night was young, but Bernice wasn’t any longer. Not that young, anyway. She liked to think about these things first.

‘Do you know why this ship is called the *Lady of Lorelei*?’ said Donimo.

‘I’ve heard of the legend of Lorelei. Wasn’t she a siren who lured sailors to their death, or something?’

‘That’s her.’

‘Bit of a stupid name for a ship, isn’t it?’



Donimo laughed. 'That's Empyrean Leisure for you. Short sighted and superficial.' He turned to face her, evidently glad of a subject he could rattle on about. 'There's a mosaic of the Lorelei in your bath.'

'I'd noticed,' said Bernice. 'Most disconcerting, having this big gormless bimbo face staring up at you through the foam.' 'Must have been terrible,' said Donimo with a smile.

Bernice took another sip of the potato spirit. Mmm, quite nice, now she was used to it.

Donimo leant over the rail and stared out to sea. 'You know, I never thought I'd see this sight again. The sea at night, from the *Lady of Lorelei* on a voyage.'

'The captain must be really pleased.'

Donimo sighed. 'He is, but there's nothing that can make up for - um.'

'Donimo, what is it? What were you going to say?'

'Nothing.'

'Is it to do with the captain?'

Donimo stayed silent.

'If I were to tell you what happened to Dieter,' he said quietly after a while, 'would you promise never to tell anyone else?'

Bernice thought about this for a moment, then said, 'Yes. Of course.' She wondered what it was that needed such delicacy.

Donimo stared out to sea. 'I was the navigation officer on the star cruise ship *Queen Catherine* when it was under Dieter's command. There was an accident. Things got complicated. I ended up as part of the team trying to repair a computer link in an external conduit. No air, clumsy old-fashioned spacesuits. The captain's wife Svetlana was on the team with me. She was an engineer. There was another blow-out, and she - she was sucked out into space. The captain saw it on the monitor. There was nothing he could do to save her.'

Bernice held her breath, feeling embarrassed about the way she had thought of the captain - as a buffoon, not a real person.

Dieter was still together enough to save my life. But afterwards - well, he's never really got over it. He had a breakdown. He can never go into space again. The only time he tried it, they had to take him to hospital. Asphyxiation - entirely psychosomatic, but it might have killed him. The only way he can go into space is if they freeze him - but he won't allow that. Too proud. So you see, he's - crippled, in a way. And put quite simply it's my duty to stay with him.'

Bernice kissed him on the cheek. 'I think you are a very kind and generous man.'

He slid his arm around her, and they stood, looking out at the dark ocean and the stars above, for a very long time.

## WAKING UP IN THE SUN

'Land ahoy!' Maeve was standing on the bottom bar of the railing, grinning, leaning over and pointing at the island.

Bernice stood beside her. 'You just couldn't resist that, could you?'

'Well, someone had to say it.'

The *Lady of Lorelei* was slowing and turning, its engines churning up the sea behind them, the deck beneath Bernice's feet swaying massively. It could sway all it liked, thought Bernice triumphantly, mentally thanking Doc Shanley again.

Before them was an island. It looked like paradise. Dominating the scene was the grey, striated cone of an extinct volcano, its top shrouded in cloud. Beneath it, lots of forest. A wide stretch of golden sand welcomed them.

'I hope there's an ancient temple or two in that lot somewhere,' Bernice mumbled.

Although she had initially vowed not to do any work, after a week on the *Lady of Lorelei* she'd started going stir-crazy. She was getting rather tired of Professors Smith, Southernay and Ingerskjold.

'I'm off,' said Maeve. 'Got to be with the Saraani, help them decide about the island. See you on the hovercraft.' She hopped down from the railing and darted away.

Bernice gazed at the island. A paradise. She sighed. If the Saraani liked it, that would be the end of the holiday - or more precisely, the middle, as it would take them a week to get back to St Oscar's.

So, either way, she was guaranteed more holiday. A lazy feeling of satisfaction flowed through her at the thought.

She wandered back to her cabin to get her survey kit and her purple velvet bikini. And to check on a few things.

Bernice opened the door of her cabin, locked it behind her and checked the hiding places. Yes, the whisky was still there in the cistern, and yes, the wine was still there, maturing nicely under a pile of underwear at the back of her wardrobe. Hardly beyond the wit of my thief. but it would do.

Now, where had she put that bikini?

Maeve walked over the dry sand, her feet sending puffs of it scudding into the warm air. She was walking along a broad natural pathway between the short purple-leaved shrubs which bordered the beach. The plants exuded a sharp peppery scent which, together with the bright sun, was making Maeve's nose run continually. Dr Smith walked beside her, still resolutely clad in his black shirt, dark trousers and patent-leather shoes, despite the heat.

'I hope they do settle here,' said Maeve, sniffing and trying to find a dry spot on her tissue. 'This island fits all the criteria.' She counted them off against her fingers. 'Plenty of flat scrubland for building, good soil, plentiful water, not that they need much, and loads of -' she batted away a small blue dragonfly which had become too inquisitive '- bloody Insects!'

Dr Smith laughed - awkwardly, but he laughed. It was nice to know he was capable of it.

The Khulayn had sent them away whilst the Saraani made their final decision about the island in private. A local sultan owned all the islands, but would only let the Saraani settle on one of them. This arrangement had satisfied the Khulayn, but Maeve thought privately that the Saraani had not thought things through clearly enough (although in the circumstances they were hardly to blame). Most of the Saraani were pregnant. They would certainly need another island eventually, as their numbers increased. Perhaps, being so short-lived, they lacked the foresight of longer-lived races. Whatever the reason, when she got back to St Oscar's, Maeve was determined to lobby for more space for the exiles.

'The Saraani are quite interesting, actually,' said Smith suddenly. 'Their lack of libido means they can focus all their energy into their intellectual, cultural and religious activities.'

Maeve nodded absently, not really interested in Smith's theories.

Smith had a bad case of dandruff and pale watery eyes. He kept his left hand in his trouser pocket, and used the right to punctuate his nasal, clipped speech. 'I intend to study the way they integrate into Dellahan society,' he said.

'They don't want to integrate,' said Maeve, kicking a small pebble. 'They want to be left alone.'

Smith shook his head. 'Dellah is a multicultural, pan-species planet - they're going to have to integrate.'

Maeve resented Smith's arrogant tone of voice. 'You must remember, they've been kicked off their homeworld. They're in culture shock. Have some respect for them - they're not like animals in a zoo!'

Smith gave her a sly sideways look. 'We're all animals in a zoo. Some of us more than others.'

Maeve wondered if this was a very crude attempt at a pass, or just general rudeness. Cautiously, she restricted herself to a light laugh and a quick 'Huh! Speak for yourself.'

They rounded a corner, and the sea came into view, sparkling in the sun. Maeve could see the shining white shape of the *Lady of Lorelei* some distance offshore. The tail fin of the hovercraft they'd used to get ashore was just visible behind a rock outcrop. Maeve saw Bernice prone on the beach, and called out. No response - must be having a doze. Enjoying her holiday. Not much of a holiday for Maeve, though. The Saraani were a demanding lot. Fresh insects. Problems with the plumbing. Problems with the air. And everything had to be done whilst respecting their demand for total privacy. On top of all that, there was the added worry of Brion. She hadn't seen much of him since the first day, and he hadn't so much as spoken a word to her.

Not that she wanted him to, not really, but it was beginning to worry her nonetheless. Why had the Saraani agreed to let someone study them - her husband, of all people? Perhaps Brion had arranged the whole thing just so he could be near her. The thought both flattered and worried her. Couldn't he leave her alone? Couldn't he see that he'd have to give up his vocation if they were ever going to live together again?

She realized that she was going to have to talk to him, but before she could start rehearsing (again) what she was going to say, her thoughts were interrupted by Smith. 'What's that?' he said, pointing out to sea.

'That's the *Lady of Lorelei*, remember?' said Maeve drily.

'No,' Smith waved his hand at the sea. 'Between it and the beach - something in the water. '

Maeve shaded her eyes. There was a wake arrowing through the calm blue water, heading for the beach. Maeve instantly thought of a torpedo - but that was ridiculous; it was travelling far too slowly and the *Lady of Lorelei* wasn't armed.

It was within metres of the shore, a dark shape with - was that arms and legs? That was definitely a head - white against the thrashing foam.

A figure emerged from the sea. Humanoid, tall, clad in black, sloshing up the shore towards Bernice.

Who could it be?

'I've not seen him on board the ship,' said Smith. 'Seems to know Summerfield, though.'

The black-haired figure was now standing over Bernice, looking down at her.

Something about it disturbed Maeve. She couldn't tell what, but it didn't seem right.

'Come on,' she said to Smith. 'I think we'd better go and find out who exactly that is.'

Mirrium stood on the shore of the lake, gazing at the volcano on the other side.

It was a perfect cone, rising out of the forest. Mist obscured the top, and Mirrium wondered whether it was extinct. If so, it could be a perfect site for a Temple of Ending. They would have to smooth out the land inside the crater, put up wind shields, perhaps a retractable roof over part of the area... He could see it now, a great multicoloured dome of glass over the grey rock, as great as any temple on Saraanis.

All the other Saraani were staring at the volcano, and Mirrium knew they were thinking exactly the same thing. The hoots and buzz of chatter buoyed Mirrium up on

a tide of relief. At last they had found somewhere! Perhaps here they could find peace of mind and carry on the worship that was now forbidden on their homeworld.

Mirrium hoped so.

The mind buried inside him was ready, more than ready, to be released to the new child.

Another reason to settle as soon as possible.

Impatient for the decision, Mirrium crowded nearer to the Khulayn. Vilbian was near by, tongue casually snaring passing dragonflies, and Zyquill was right at the front, before the large boulder on which the Khulayn was standing.

The Khulayn raised his arms, and spoke. 'This is a fine island, and it would be suitable for our settlement.'

Appreciative hoots from the pilgrims. 'But I have decided that we shall not settle here.'

A susurrant of alarm.

'This is but the first island in the chain. There are seven others, and we should explore more of them before making our choice.'

Mirrium flicked his tongue in consternation. What was the Khulayn saying? What was wrong with this island?

Vilbian spoke up. 'The Khulayn is right. We shouldn't make a hasty decision.'

Mirrium stared at Vilbian. What was going on?

The charts illustrate that there are bigger islands ahead.'

Charts? Since when did Vilbian have access to charts? Mirrium glanced around.

Unbelievably, a few others were nodding in agreement.

The Khulayn went on. 'I know what we have all been through. But let us remember the trials of Zhylyvavian who travelled for his entire lifetime before founding the first Temple of Ending. We can, we will, endure a little more.'

Now, more Saraani were nodding, fluting their agreement. Mirrium felt the blood rush around his head. He clutched his clews and decided to do something he had never done before.

He spoke up against the Khulayn.

He hooted to get everyone's attention. Once he had got it, he wondered what to do with it. The Khulayn nodded and gestured for Mirrium to speak.

He looked round for a rock to stand on, but there weren't any, so he just started speaking.

'The GodUniverse has sent us to this island on purpose. It is a good island, and we should settle here. Why do we need to wander endlessly in search of our new home? Besides, the egg I am carrying is fertilized. It is due in a few days.'

There were murmurs of agreement from the other Saraani. All of them, apart from the Khulayn, Vilbian and Zyquill, were carrying young.

'Your argument is noted, Mirrium,' said the Khulayn, 'but let us not forget the purpose of this voyage. It is a pilgrimage. Surely, Mirrium, you must have endured at least one pilgrimage on Saraanis?'

'That was different,' said Mirrium, remembering his first pilgrimage. 'That was on land, alone, and I knew where the shrine was. I knew how long it would take to get there. This Is on sea, in a strange machine of straight lines and stairs, among aliens, and we have no real idea of where and when, or even if, we will find a suitable site for a shrine! This is a good place - let's choose it now!'

There were whispers of agreement from some, hoots of disapproval from others.

'Pilgrim Mirrium,' said the Khulayn. We are forging new ground on this world. Other adherents of the religious order are settling on other planets which have given them asylum, but there is no precedent for what we are doing. I believe that there will be a better island further on. These islands are grouped close together; you will only have to wait for a few more days, at most.'

Mirrium wanted to say more, but detected a note of annoyance in the Khulayn's voice, and decided to remain silent. He'd said enough; he'd been braver than he thought he ever could be. 'I am sorry, Khulayn. I only speak as I feel, as Zhylvlavian teaches.'

You were right to speak, Mirrium, but now we must leave.'



The Khulayn stepped down from the boulder, and headed back towards the ship.

With a last glance at the mist-shrouded volcano, Mirrium followed.

‘Benny! Wake up!’

Maeve’s voice.

Bernice woke abruptly, to see a bizarre figure standing over her.

She sat up and removed her sunglasses.

The sun was behind the figure. It was tall, clad entirely in black body armour which seemed fused to the body. There was a breastplate bearing a stylized gold letter V’. The face was pale, with high cheekbones and oval black eyes. It looked oddly androgynous. Muscled arms were stretched out towards her, but it wasn’t moving, wasn’t threatening her in any way, just standing there. The expression on the pale face seemed almost pleading.

‘Benny!’ Maeve, from just behind her. ‘I don’t like this!’

Bernice looked around, frowning. She saw Professor Smith, sweat plastering his pale hair to his brow, panting. Maeve was behind him.

Bernice turned back to face the armoured figure. ‘Hello.’ Presumably it could talk.

‘Ber-nice.’ The voice was flat, lifeless.

‘Do you know this - person?’ said Smith, splaying a hand at the figure.

‘Never seen him before in my life.’ Bernice scrambled to her feet. How did this - thing - know her name? The mouth with its dry lips twitched, a feeble imitation of a smile. A heavily gloved hand reached out to her.

The figure spoke. ‘Professor Summerfield - Professor - Bernice.’ The words were gasped out, as if against great pressure. ‘He was going to make me immortal -’

All Bernice’s this-means-trouble alarms started going off at once. She reached out and took the strange being’s hand. ‘Who was?’ she asked quietly.

‘The thing - in the trees -’

The big hand felt clammy, and Bernice was uncomfortably aware of its power.

‘Who are you?’ asked Bernice.

It’s mouth started working, stammering, and it suddenly shouted: Th- Th- Theo!’

Then the eyes went dead, and the hand holding Bernice’s spasmed.

Bernice let go and stood back.

Theo? The name rang a bell - but a very faint bell. And it *knew* her. And it was - what was it? It looked military - the black suit had the joyless, streamlined functionality of something made for war.

Bernice glanced at her friends. Smith looked curious. Maeve looked spooked.

The ‘soldier’ raised his arm again, but this time the hand was clenched in a fist.

His face was totally expressionless.

‘Bernice -’ said Maeve.

Bernice focused on the gloved hand.

Thee soldier suddenly lunged towards her and a foot-long steel spike shot out of a knuckle on the glove.

Maeve swore, Smith shouted in alarm.

The end of the spike missed Bernice’s breasts by half an inch as she stumbled backwards, her feet getting entangled in her towel.

The soldier swung his arm in an arc, his face completely calm and dispassionate. It collided with Maeve’s body and she spun away, to land in a heap, clutching her head.

Smith stood, paralysed with fear, his eyes wide.

Bernice twisted to dodge the weapon, fell, and her attacker pounced. She found herself on her back, the soldier standing over her, face still blank. He pulled his arm back, aiming the spike right at her heart.

Bernice scrambled backwards as the arm lanced forward and thank God he missed, but what was that cold feeling in her leg?

She looked down to see the spike embedded in her left thigh.

She looked at the soldier's face. The eyes were flicking open and closed, the mouth working, making baby-like popping sounds. Saliva trickled on to the sand.

The pain. Where was the pain? Was the spike really through her leg? If it was, surely it would hurt but it felt dead and she dared not move she *couldn't* move she was pinned to the sodding beach but there was no pain and even weirder no blood -

'Please,' whispered Bernice, trying to keep her voice calm 'don't take the spike out. Please. Just leave it there.'

Maeve crawled towards Bernice, eyes wide, staring at the soldier. His mouth was still working, and, he was gasping, if trying to say something.

'Don't move,' said Bernice through gritted teeth.

Suddenly he uttered a strangled cry and yanked his arm back.

Bernice heaved with the pain of it, feeling the steel spike grate against bone and suddenly it was out and, God, the blood! It pumped from her leg in thick, dark spurts soaked into the sand, like ink into blotting paper.

It mesmerized her for a second.

But only a second.

She scrambled for the towel and wrapped it round her upper thigh, trying to staunch the blood, Maeve helping her, 'Pull, for God's sake, before I bleed to death!'

Bernice looked up. It was coming for her again. It was saying something - what? *I don't want to do this I don't want to do this* - over and over quickly but it was still coming for her and Maeve and it was raising the spike again and -

Professor Smith grabbed the soldier's arm and yanked it back and away from Bernice, ducking the spike which was red with her blood. The soldier spun, arms akimbo, with Smith dangling off the end of one of them. And then the soldier twisted the other way, tripped up Smith and caught him in a bearhug. Smith yelled, his face squashed against his attacker's broad chest. Bernice saw pale, terrified eyes and a screaming mouth.

Suddenly, the soldier dropped Smith, who fell to the sand with a thump. The soldier stood, with that chilling lack of

expression, staring inland. Then he tamed his whole body slowly, as if casting about for something. Now his back was to them and he raised the spike, like an aerial, to the sky. It retracted with a buzz and a click, and he ran towards the shore.

Bernice's vision was blurring as she watched the thing stride into the sea, splashing up fountains of foam. Wading deeper, until the black-haired head was all that was visible above the swelling sea. Then, that too vanished below the surface and Bernice hung on to Maeve but the pain in her leg was too much and Goddess look at the towel it's all red you can't see the stripes –

## SECRETS AND LIES

Captain Dieter Fontana stared out of the window of his cabin; lost in thought.

Things were going badly.

Professors Smith and Summerfield were in the sick-bay, and the Saraani were demanding to know what was going on. It was quite possible that the pilgrimage would be called off, that the *Lady of Lorelei* would once again face the scrapyard. He shook his head, and took another sip of whisky. The fact that this was forbidden by the Saraani was of minuscule importance compared to what had happened.

He thought back to the weeks before the voyage. The seemingly endless surge of messages from the vice-chancellor of St Oscar's, telling him that due to funding problems they had no option but to sell the *Lady of Lorelei*. He remembered the weasel words: *funds directed to the upkeep of this vessel could be usefully diverted into more productive areas*.

Like salaries for professors of Chelonian eating habits and funding for expeditions to the annexe to the back of beyond, thought the captain sourly.

He'd challenged the decision, of course. He wasn't about to let his ship go without a fight. He'd heard of a proposal to turn the *Lady of Lorelei* into a floating museum of Goll nautical history - hardly what he wanted for her, but better than watching her scuppered. He'd been involved in slow, painful negotiations with the Goll government. Their offer was far greater than any scrap company's, and he'd been optimistic, but at the last moment, the Goll government lost

That had been a bad night. He'd stood on the edge of his life, seeing nothing but blackness. The blackness of space, Waiting to swallow him up.

When all had seemed lost and the competitive-tendering proposals from the salvage companies were in their final

stage of approval, the vice-chancellor called him into her office to tell him about the Saraani offer.

He hadn't believed it at first. It seemed too good to be true, too miraculous that his beloved ship had won a reprieve at the eleventh-and-a-half hour. Equally incredible was the amount of money the alien pilgrims were offering. Enough hard currency to make the *Lady of Lorelei* into a private museum. With himself as curator, of course.

But it had all been true, and Dieter Fontana's future had looked bright for the first time in years. In a matter of weeks, the *Lady of Lorelei* had been restored to her former glory. Well, almost. There hadn't been enough time to get everything absolutely right. Still, no one had complained - except Professor Summerfield, but Dieter got the feeling that she was the sort of person who was always complaining about something or other.

And the feeling when the ship had left port and coursed out into the open sea for the first time in over a year! It was like being born again. Dieter Fontana was once more a happy man. The *Lady of Lorelei* wasn't just a ship to him. It represented a whole new phase of his life. He could never travel in space again, so the *Lady of Lorelei* was his freedom. You could keep the deep profundity of infinite space, he thought, just give me the wide blue ocean and I'll be happy. Or as happy as I can be. As happy as I was when - when -

The captain closed his eyes, and the treasured image of Svetlana came immediately into his mind. Long, lustrous black hair, a quizzical smile, and capable hands, not shy of delving into junction boxes, bulkheads, airlocks and the entrails of engines -

- *flying out into black space a spinning silver figure getting smaller and he couldn't save her* -

Dieter opened his eyes. Every night, he dreamt about Svetlana, dying in the coldness of space. Fighting for breath, knowing that only death awaited her.

He threw the glass into the corner.

We are all alone, thought the captain. We all feel pain. And, however much he loved her, the *Lady of Lorelei* was just a hunk of metal. A huge, blind hunk of metal which

could be damaged, but was itself insensate, could never feel pain or grief or sadness.

There came a knock at the door.

‘Enter.’

The captain turned to see one of the St Oscar’s professor in the doorway. It took him a while to realize which one. ‘Dr Arvaile?’

Dr Arvaile nodded. ‘Captain,’ he said. ‘I have some important information for you. I know what attacked Professor Summerfield.’

‘You’re lucky,’ said the doctor. ‘It’s only a flesh wound.’

‘Only? Oh, I’m so glad. I’ll just ignore the pain, then, shall I?’

The ship’s doctor, Gregor, had a closely shorn head and goatee beard, cold hands and a calm voice. He’d had little to deal with so far and seemed to be enjoying Bernice’s injury ‘The spike went through the inside top of the thigh here, just missing your femur and your femoral artery — which was lucky. That must have been one sharp prong he skewered you with. It’s a good job you had that towel and someone there to help or you would have lost a lot more blood. We’ve given you coagulants so there’ll be no more bleeding. There will be extensive bruising, though, and you’ll not be able to walk for a day or two.’

Bernice groaned. ‘Can I have a second opinion, please?’

‘If you feel the need to get mobile, we found you this. ‘ The young doctor stepped away from the bed, and gestured to a steel-and-plastic contraption leaning against the opposite wall of the sick-bay. It had two big wheels and two little wheels and armrests. It was a folded-up wheelchair.

So she was to be an invalid for the rest of the holiday.

With a brief smile the doctor moved to the other bed, Where Professor Smith lay, still unconscious. He’d suffered severe bruising and a couple of cracked ribs.

All in all, not a lovely day on the beach.

A rattle of bangles from the doorway. ‘Is it visiting time yet?’

Bernice looked up, saw brown eyes, thin, dark eyebrows, an elfin smile. Maeve.

'You bet. Brought any grapes? Or better, grapes which have been crushed, fermented, and bottled as wine?'

Maeve frowned, shook her head and stepped inside. Then Bernice saw who was with her.

Dr Brion Arvaile.

Oh.

They sat down on little chairs by the side of Bernice's bed.

Husband and wife, together. Maeve looked greatly excited, whilst Arvaile looked - as ever - stern and serious.

'Hello, Bernice,' said Maeve. 'How are you feeling?'

'Swollen and painful. Nice to see you two together,' she added, unable to keep the irony from her voice.

Maeve and Arvaile exchanged glances, as if they too were surprised to find themselves sitting side by side in the same room.

'Oh, we're not "together",' said Maeve. 'Brion's got something to tell you.'

'Yes,' said Arvaile. His voice was deep, clear, with an edge of nervousness.

Bernice shifted against her pillows impatiently. 'Well come on, out with it.'

Arvaile clasped his hands together. 'I know what attacked you. From your description, it sounds like a military bio-construct. Programmed for killing and survival, in that order. You say you saw a letter "V" on its breastplate?'

Bernice remembered the report she'd given to the captain. 'Yes.'

Arvaile dropped his gaze. 'Then I am afraid it is from Visphok.'

Bernice frowned. 'I thought the new government was pacifist.'

'It is. But before, and for centuries, Visphok was ruled by a succession of emperors and empresses, which by the time of my birth had degenerated into a military dictatorship. The reason I left Visphok was that because of my skills in the field of biogenetics, I was coerced into taking part in the development programme for these bioconstructs. I became a Senior Research Scientist, but I disagreed with their methods, and was stupid enough to say so. My dissent



reached the ears of the Czaritza Violaine, and I had to flee the planet before she could finish me off.' He sighed, and then smiled. 'I expect Maeve has told you all about me.'

Maeve blushed and fiddled with her bangles. 'Yes, I have, Brion. And I admire you for the stand you made. That hasn't changed. But you're still a genetic engineer. You're still devoted to your work -'

'You knew that,' he muttered. 'You *knew*, and now -'

Bernice could see a full-scale argument developing. 'Now then, you two, stop it!'

They both looked at her in surprise.

'I want to know more about this bioconstruct. How can it end up on Dellah if it's from Visphok? Didn't bring one along as a souvenir, did you?'

Arvaile coughed. 'No, of course not. I think it must have been sent to kill me, but something went wrong. Maybe its ship crashed, it became damaged and it attacked you instead. All I can do is apologize, and assure you that if its wetware is damaged it won't survive for long.'

'I saw it swimming back towards the ship,' said Bernice.

Arvaile nodded. 'The captain has instigated a search which has so far found nothing. My theory is that it malfunctioned; and drowned.'

'If that thing was sent to kill you,' reasoned Bernice, 'surely you must be worried that the Czaritza has found out where you are?'

Arvaile shook his head. 'No. She's on the run. Won't have time to bother over me any more.'

'So where is she now?'

Arvaile raised his eyebrows. 'No one knows. After the revolution, the Czaritza took a battle cruiser and headed off into space. Hopefully she's been killed in a meteor storm or fallen into a gravity whirlpool. '

Bernice sank back into her pillow. She suddenly felt very tired, and a little scared and vulnerable. She didn't like the sound of a deposed dictator with a battle cruiser going AWOL one bit. For all they knew, she could be heading for Dellah at this very moment. 'Well, I find it worrying,' said Bernice.

Maeve smiled indulgently. 'There's no need to worry, Benny. You just rest up for a few days. The pilgrimage is going well, and the Khulayn sends his best wishes.'

'I feel better already,' said Bernice. 'Well, thank you for that cheery tale,' she said to Arvaile. 'I'm going to have a bit of a doze.'

'Give me a call when you want to be helped into your wheelchair,' said Maeve with a wink, and then she and her husband were gone.

Maeve had walked with Brion back to his cabin. She wasn't sure why.

'Would you like to come in for a while?'

Maeve hesitated. She knew Brion would never, ever harm her, but the act of going into his cabin would symbolize a new stage in their relationship. A stage of reconciliation.

She was horrified to feel a flutter of delight. Was this what she really wanted? To be back with Brion, despite everything he was? Was her faith really that weak?

Her mind a whirl, Maeve let Brion lead her into his cabin. It was the polar opposite of hers and Benny's - bare and functional, with pine furniture and a bunk bed, of all things, the top tier of which had been visibly slept in. There was none of the usual male mess - clothes, books, food - but Maeve had not been expecting it. She had been the messy one in their marriage.

It was something they used to laugh about.

She sat down in a chair, Brion opposite her.

There was one thing they had to clear up. Maeve steeled herself. 'Brion, I want to talk to you about the Saraani. About your work with them.'

Brion tensed, just a little. 'What, exactly, do you want to know?'

'I want to know how they approached you. How you managed to be on this pilgrimage without my knowledge. You must have known that I was the liaison between the Saraani and St Oscar's.'

Brion shook his head. 'Maeve, I never knew a thing until the night before we set sail. My head of department contacted

me. It seems that he'd heard of the Saraani pilgrimage, and saw the opportunity to send someone to find out more about them. That person was me.'

This did not fit with Maeve's conception of the Saraani's strict code of privacy. 'The Khulayn would never agree to something like that.'

'That's where you're wrong. I met the Khulayn a few hours before we set off. He consented to my studying their biology, as long as their religious practices were left alone, especially something called Holy Transference.'

Maeve frowned. She'd never heard that term used by the Khulayn or any of the Saraani. 'What is Holy Transference?'

Brion shrugged. 'I don't know. I have asked, but the Khulayn wouldn't tell me. He got quite angry, in fact. It is very slow work.' He rubbed his chin - just the lightest dusting of stubble. She knew that he usually shaved twice a day and stubble was always a sign that he was very busy. 'I am composing a textbook on their biological make-up. It's very interesting. Their biochemistry is like nothing I have ever come across before.'

As he talked, Maeve caught sight of something briefly out of the corner of her eye, resting along the spine of one of the few books on the cabin's single shelf.

It was an oval piece of silver metal, with a gold V emblazoned upon it.

*- the thing stood over Bernice, silver spike ready to pierce her heart, black armour still wet from the sea and on its chest a gold 'V' -*

*The symbol of Violaine. The Czaritza.*

Maeve snapped her attention back to Brion. She felt herself go light and floaty. Had he noticed that she had seen the object?

He gave no sign, as he talked, but Maeve was no longer listening. She was thinking of the thing, its huge, armoured body, its pale face, and above all those eyes, which had never wept or crinkled in a smile or shone with love, only burnt with the purpose science had driven into it.

For it must be a creature of science.

But did Brion have anything to do with this? Just because he possessed something bearing the symbol of Violaine, it didn't mean he had anything to do with the dictator.

There was only one way to find out.

'Brion,' said Maeve. 'What is that thing over there?'

He turned to where she was pointing. 'What thing?'

'On top of that book. It's got the Czaritza Violaine's mark on it.'

He looked at her, and for a moment seemed not to know what to say.

'Oh - that,' he said, picking it up and pocketing it. 'Just a souvenir from pre-revolution days.'

Maeve folded her arms, trying to stay in control. If he was lying about this then he might be lying about everything, might be -

'You had something to do with that thing on the beach, didn't you?' She was amazed at the calmness, the cold accusation, in her voice.

Brion's shoulders slumped, as if in defeat. He seemed about to confess all. But instead he said, 'No. That is a ridiculous assumption.'

Maeve stood up to leave. She had her answer. Because she knew he was still lying.

'Where are you going?' Brion sounded lost, almost frightened.

Maeve turned, her hand on the door. 'To pray for your soul.'

Professor Smith had regained consciousness, and Bernice was beginning to wish he hadn't.

He had propounded his theories about the Chelonians, Krakenites, Valethske, Xarax, Tzun, Tractites, and other races that Bernice had either never heard of, or not particularly liked. He had just got round to the Saraani and Bernice was of the impression that he saw alien races as fascinating exhibits to theorize about rather than living, breathing beings with existences outside of textbooks.

'You don't get out much, do you?' said Bernice, interrupting Smith's flow.

'I don't have a lot of time!' protested Smith. 'There are so many races to categorize - the Oblongooni, for instance. They have thirteen genders, as opposed to the Saraani's one, and it is interesting to compare the differences -' And he was off again.

Bernice was in a fed-up, fidgety, slightly childish mood. Her left leg was numb and, perversely, the skin beneath the polyplaster was itching like mad. If her only source of entertainment was winding this man up then so be it. 'Look,' she said. 'You're a professor of - what is it?'

'Alien-human interaction and integration.'

Bernice snapped her fingers. 'Social interaction - exactly. You should get out more, have a few beers. Have a laugh. You can't be dry and intellectual all the time. I find that going out - out of the usual routine, out of yourself - helps you focus on work.'

'I have my hobbies,' said Smith defensively.

Oh God, thought Bernice, I really don't want to know about those. 'I'll tell you what, when we get back to St Oscar's I'll take you to the Witch and Whirlwind. You'll certainly learn about alien-human interaction there. It'll be a real eye-opener.'

Silence.

He'd shut up, thought Bernice with relief. I've embarrassed him. Oops. (Ha!)

'That sounds like a good idea,' said Smith, his voice rising with enthusiasm.

Oh blimey, what had she done?

Then she suddenly remembered where she had heard the name Theo before. The Witch and Whirlwind. 'Goddess! He was trying to chat me up!'

'I am not trying to chat you up!' squawked Smith. 'I genuinely think that it would be a good idea if I -'

Bernice shushed him. 'Listen, this is serious. A week or so ago, a shy young xenobiology student called Theo made a half-hearted but rather sweet attempt to chat me up.'

'Male attempts at procuring female company -' began Smith, but Bernice silenced him once more.

I remember him because the day after, he vanished. It was in the campus bulletin. They appealed for witnesses and I had to tell them what had happened in the bar. Couldn't tell them much, though. The Dellah constabulary are still searching for him, for all I know. '

'I don't see the relevance of this to our current situation,' said Smith stuffily.

Bernice sighed. 'The bioconstruct that attacked me. I asked its name. It said "Theo" - remember?'

'Are you sure?'

'Of course I'm sure,' snapped Bernice.

'What does that prove? That this bioconstruct had the same name as the missing student.'

Bernice chewed her bottom lip thoughtfully. 'No. More than that. It *knew* me.' She sat up straight in her bed. The pain seemed to have diminished slightly. She caught sight of the wheelchair on the other side of the room. It was laughing at her.

'Time I got mobile again.' Bernice pulled the cord hanging by the bed which would - she hoped - summon the doctor.

Maeve waited.

She'd got out of Brion's room as quickly as possible, and was now hiding behind a fluted pillar, alone except for the drone of the engines and the thudding of her heart, waiting for him to come out.

She would follow him. Find out what this was all about.

She so wanted it to be nothing. She so wanted to have misjudged the situation, for Brion to be telling the truth. Perhaps that oval thing was nothing to do with Bernice's attacker.

Quite suddenly the door opened and Brion stepped out. He slammed it behind him and marched off down the corridor.

Maeve followed him into the atrium at the end of the cabin deck, where he entered a lift. Maeve waited until the door closed, and watched the display above the doors: G Deck, F Deck, E deck... The lift went past all the decks and stopped at: Cargo Deck. The lowest level.

If she called the other lift, would he notice? Had he already noticed that she was following him?

There was only one way to find out.

Maeve called the other lift.

After a brief but tense descent the doors opened to reveal a narrow corridor, with dirty metal walls and cracked plastic floor. It seemed to run the whole length of the cargo deck. It was lit from above by bare white neon lights, not all of which were working. So deep down, so different to the scented and pastel-tinted luxury of the upper decks. She couldn't see Brion, but as she peered down the corridor there was a hiss and the sound of a heavy door sliding open.

She crept along the corridor. She passed A Hold on her right. To her left, a plain metal wall, beyond which must be the hull of the ship. Maeve flattened herself against the wall as she reached B Hold. The door was still open. He must be confident of not being followed. Or in such a hurry to do whatever it was he was doing that he had just forgotten.

She put her head round the side of the door, receiving a blast of cool air in her face. She couldn't see anything because of the steam - it was cold, like a fridge. A cryo hold? What was he doing in a cryo hold?

This was silly. Why was she skulking after him like a second-rate spy? She was his wife, and whatever he was up to, he couldn't, wouldn't, harm her.

Maeve steeled herself and stepped into B Hold.

It took a while for her to make everything out, but when she did, Maeve realized that she'd stepped into a nightmare.

The walls and ceiling were covered with thick, fibrous insulating cladding, painted white, sloping inwards towards the floor. Against the two longest walls were racks of metal tubing, like scaffolding, which harshly reflected the light. Lashed vertically into these were dozens and dozens of transparent, coffin-like containers. The plastic was fogged and frosted but there was no mistaking what was inside. There must be about two hundred of them, all frozen, all waiting to be awoken.

Maeve walked up to the nearest of them, hypnotized.

Inside, she could make out a black-haired head, with the same pale, chiselled features as the thing that had attacked Bernice. Its eyes were closed, and tubes ran into its mouth and nose. Its face was calm, like a sleeping statue. She reached out and touched the surface of the container. It was ice cold. Such a thing could never live as she lived. Could never know God. It was a thing; a godless thing.

She looked round. Where was Brion?

There was a bulky console in the middle of the room. Brion was right at the other side of the hold, where, on a plinth leaning against a wire-mesh grid was one of the godless things, out of its coffin, its pale face reflecting the light.

Sweet Mother Marunia, it's the one that attacked Benny. It has to be.

Maeve ran up to the console and ducked down behind it. The words of her Marunian tutors came back to her. How science could not recognize good and bad. It just did what it did, like a giant raping monster with endless seed. And now she was seeing the fruit.

Her childhood nightmares had been like this. She felt like she wanted to cry, but told herself to be strong.

She'd been living a lie. All the time she had been married to Brion, he'd been doing this. Making these godless things. What it was all for, why he was here on this ship, she had no idea. But she had to stop it, in the name of God.

She stood up. 'This ends now.'

Brion gave no sign that he had heard her; he carried on working for a few seconds - fixing something back on to the godless thing, she thought - and then he turned, slowly, a look of sadness shrouding his face. 'Maeve.'

'You liar. '

Brion shook his head, and he smiled. The bastard actually smiled. 'You don't understand.'

'I understand enough. You lied to me, you're not working on Saraani biology, you're doing - this!' She gestured at the sleeping figures in their plastic coffins.

'Maeve, please let me explain,' he said calmly, walking towards her.



He was standing opposite her, and he reached out a hand to touch her face. His hand was cold, icy cold. 'You're right, it does end here. I never wanted you to be mixed up in this, I never wanted you to know -'

She slapped his hand away. 'So you would have carried on lying! If I had not come on this trip, I would never have found out!'

Brion gripped her hand. His eyes were wet with tears. 'Maeve, please let me explain.'

Maeve nodded, and he let go of her.

Brion started to walk about the hold. 'First of all, yes, I have been lying to you - but only to protect you. I never wanted you to get caught up in all this. It's Violaine's legacy, and I'm just cleaning up after her.'

'What do you mean, "Violaine's legacy"?'

Brion spread his hands wide. 'These bioconstructs were going to be Violaine's warriors. You know that I object to science being bent to military ends - it was one of the few things we agreed upon.'

'So what are you doing with them?'

'Getting them off this planet, so that they can be deactivated by the people in charge of the new government. I was in the Resistance, you know. I told you that. Now the Resistance is in power; I'm a Chief Scientist. I have to obey orders. I'm taking them to a rendezvous with the regular army. They're waiting on the next island.'

Maeve wasn't sure she quite understood this story, but she understood one thing: Brion was lying. She'd been married to him long enough to know about this evasiveness, about the awkward explanations that didn't quite make sense.

'They won't destroy them,' she said. 'They'll find a use for them. You know that.'

Brion didn't reply, and Maeve sensed that he knew perfectly well they were going to use them. He'd probably been ordered to do this. That was what he'd meant when he'd said 'I have to obey orders'.

She walked round to the godless thing which had attacked them. Out of its casing, it towered over her. She peered closer

at its armour. What was it made of? It looked like an amalgam of plastic, metal and flesh. Maeve reached out to touch it. It was warm.

Brion was at her side. 'Careful, Maeve.'

She opened her mouth to speak but suddenly, the godless thing jerked to life, and shoved Maeve away. She heard Brion cry out as she staggered backwards. She slipped on a patch of ice and fell down.

The thing stepped from its plinth and picked her up as if she were a doll. Brion leapt on its back. Its hands were around her throat and it was squeezing.

'Brion,' she gasped. But she couldn't say anything else. She couldn't quite believe it was happening. Her head was pounding as though there were a river coursing behind her eyes, threatening to burst. She flailed at the thing but it was solid, like rock. She couldn't feel if her hands hurt. That must mean it was over. Her life. She was going to die.

*She was going to die.*

Its face, so dead, so godless, would be the last thing she would ever see.

It was saying something -

'- I don't want to do this tell Bernice I love her Theo loves her-'

## TO HIDE IN DEATH AWHILE

Bernice gripped the cool steel push-wheels of the chair, and rocked herself backwards and forwards experimentally.

She rolled forward a lot quicker than she'd expected and the footplate of the chair collided with the metal leg of Professor Smith's bed.

'Have you got a licence for that thing?'

Bernice was pleased that he was at least making a reasonable attempt at humour. 'Sorry.'

She backed up. Into a glass cabinet full of glass things. It clattered and tinkled alarmingly, but nothing smashed.

She turned round so that she was facing her bed.

It had taken her and the doctor ages to get her into the chair. Now all she wanted to do was get out of the bloody thing and back into bed. Her leg was aching, and the painkillers made her feel woozy. She wondered if she could get to her cabin in this thing without causing a major incident.

Then she heard a sound from outside. The sound of a Saraani, hooting inarticulate sounds. And a man's voice, thick with emotion, imploring.

'She's my *wife!*'

Arvaile. Oh shit.

'Something's up,' said Professor Smith, stating the obvious.

'Doctor!' called Bernice, hating to be in a position where she had to cry out *that* name in moments of stress.

No use. No reply. And she could still hear Arvaile's voice. There was an edge of hysteria to it that she didn't like at all.

She looked at Smith. 'Pull your cord.'

Smith frowned uncomprehendingly, then grabbed the cord hanging beside his bed. He gave it a tug and it came away

from its mooring on the ceiling, falling to lie like a strand of spaghetti across the sheets.

‘Typical.’ Bernice hauled herself round and aligned the wheels of the chair with the route to the door.

Luckily, it wasn’t far away. Past the bed next to hers - which was empty - a cabinet and a sink, and she was there.

She used the footplate to bang open the door - then froze at the sight which greeted her.

Maeve was lying on the floor. Arvaile was leaning against the wall, staring at Maeve.

And a Saraani was crouched over Maeve, its blue cloak shrouding her body. Its head was bent close to hers, a thick white protuberance running from its mouth aperture into her mouth.

Bernice stared in disbelief.

A trickle of blood ran from the corner of Maeve’s mouth.

Her neck was purple, bruised.

Arvaile suppressed a sob.

‘What is going on?’ shouted Bernice.

Arvaile jumped, white as a sheet. The Saraani - which one was it? The Khulayn? Vilbian? - paid no attention, just carried on sucking out Maeve’s guts or whatever it was doing.

Bernice gripped the wheels of the chair, aiming the footplate at the Saraani’s head. It was at just the right height. ‘Stop that now.’

She gripped the wheels, ready for a big shove, but before she could move Arvaile ran across and held her back. His face was white and frighteningly calm, and his hands on her bare arms were cold.

‘We’re saving her. I won’t let her be dead!’ He shouted this last line and pushed Bernice back into the sick-bay.

The swing doors shut on the footplate of the chair and Bernice collided with the bed.

Smith was struggling to sit up. ‘What’s happening, Summerfield?’

‘Murder,’ gasped Bernice, pushing herself out of the door again, but the chair swerved and she half fell, half hauled

herself out of it, to totter through the swing doors and land in a heap next to Maeve.

She was lying there, alone, blood trickling from her mouth and nose, pooling on the white floor.

‘Maeve? Oh God.’

Bernice pulled herself along the floor, using her hands and good leg, until she was right next to her friend.

She hugged her. Her body felt cold. Those bruises...

‘Oh, Maeve,’ Bernice crawled to her. ‘What have they done?’

Bernice felt for a pulse.

There was none.

Maeve was dead.

## A CONVERSATION

*You can't escape, Theo. You 're a killer-. Murderer. Snuffer out of flames. Snapper of stems. And you're enjoying it, aren't you?*

No. No. Shut up. Leave me alone.

*You know you are. You love bringing death to the weak and defenceless. You love seeing their faces as you tower over them. Silly screaming dollies, white-faced and string-necked, eyes wide and wet with fear. You love killing them.*

No. It wasn't me. Wasn't me.

*You love watching them suffer. You love the power. That's why you only attack women, isn't it? Can't have them so you have to kill them.*

No, no.

*Never had even one. Never will now.*

Stop it.

*Still, you've only killed one of them so far. A pretty poor tally for a killer as devoted as you.*

I am not a killer not a killer.

*But there are plenty more, waiting for you. Wanting you to end their lives.*

Stop stop stop.

*Bernice wants you.*

Stop stop this now.

*Wants you to kill her.*

I won't I can't.

*You couldn't, you mean! Past tense. You couldn't then, but next time, next time! Let's review what happened on the beach, shall we?*

I don't want to see don't make me see.

*Bernice lay on the beach, her eyes wide, trying to scramble away from you. You lunge down at her, impaling her, and she*

screams as you pierce her flesh. You like that sound, don't you?

No. Not me. Not me not me not me.

*But you didn't kill her. You failed. You missed all her vital organs. Still, it must have hurt her. Hurt her a lot. There was so much lovely blood. Isn't that good?*

No! No. No.

*Shut up, you little shit. You tried to kill her, but something got through. You little bastard, you got through, didn't you? I wasn't watching closely enough. You're allowed one failure — next time, you have to dispatch her.*

Stop this. Let me out.

*Don't worry. You're improving already. You managed to kill Bernice's friend. Well done! Got her in one! Top of the class! A Plus! Great, wasn't it? Shall we review it, so you can see what you did right?*

Please not that. Please. Not that.

*She's very small. Half your size. Your hands tighten around her throat. It's so, so easy, it feels as though her neck is a paper tube. Crush, crush, crush. You can feel your fingertips mesh round the back of her neck. Squeeze, squeeze hard.. Her eyes bulge out of her face, and her tongue sticks right out. Doesn't she look silly? Like a cartoon! And the noise she's making - like a dumb animal! Go on, finish it! Her face is going red, then purple and you actually see the moment when she realizes that her life is over. You drop her to the floor.*

Not me, not me.

*Pity that Arvaile managed to deactivate you before you could tear off her head and drink her blood.*

Please stop this. Kill me, I don't want to do any more.

*Oh, I'm not going to kill you. This is far too much fun!*

I want to die. I don't want to go on like this.

*You're not going to die. I won't let you. Not before you've killed Bernice, anyway. She's injured now. Easier to kill. Next chance you get, you're going to crush her like an insect.*

*You're going to split her open and wash your face in her blood.*

No no no no no no.

*Yes.*



## SUDDENLY MY FEET ARE FEET OF MUD, IT ALL GOES SLO-MO

Bernice woke up under the glowering auspices of a belligerent hangover. She welcomed it with a sensual groan. Hangovers were like old friends. She could deal with hangovers. It had even been remarked that Bernice Summerfield was at her best when hung over. She turned her pillow over, relishing the pleasing coolness on the other side.

And then she remembered Maeve.

Maeve was dead.

Bernice stared at the ceiling drapes, a pixie-like image of Maeve flitting through her head. She heard Maeve's voice, her laughter, saw her little hands, her smooth forehead and thin eyebrows, her dark, shining eyes.

She saw all this, and felt nothing.

Maeve was dead and she didn't feel anything. Hadn't they been friends, or something?

Bernice lay there, not feeling anything, except the faint thrum of the ship's engines as they powered the *Lady of Lorelei* onward through the Silvasic Sea, and a numbness which enveloped her whole body like a shroud. She lay there, thinking of Maeve, half expecting her to walk into her room, demanding to know what was going on.

But she still didn't feel anything. Wasn't she supposed to feel grief, sorrow, sadness, an aching sense of loss?

None of the above. Just hung over.

Best not to think about it. Concentrate on other things.

She turned her head and caught sight of the little plastic bottle of painkillers perched on her bedside table. There was a bottle of whisky next to it. It was half empty. Bernice groaned, less sensually this time, and massaged her temples.

The doctor had offered her more and stronger painkillers after they'd found her on the floor outside the sick-bay. She'd accepted them, mainly to keep him quiet. No way was she going to take any of the smooth orange capsules. She knew from past experience that painkillers did indeed kill pain, but they also brought down a mushy, dull fog on the senses, turning her into a dozey rag doll. And Bernice wanted to retain the sharpness of her mental faculties until she got to the bottom of things. So she'd discharged herself (despite Professor Smith's long-winded advice to the contrary) and wheeled herself back to her cabin, intending to sink at least a half-bottle of whisky. Which, of course, had not brought down a mushy, dull fog on her senses at all. No, more like a gigantic clanging iron thunderstorm. She'd eventually passed out, slumped on her bed in a twisted heap.

Now she looked blearily at the bottles as they slid in and out of focus. One large, one small. Mummy bottle and baby bottle.

Bernice couldn't feel any pain. Had it gone? Perhaps her body was imitating her heart - not feeling anything. Or - and Bernice favoured this theory - the alcohol had done its work. But, if she tried to move, would the pain return?

Only one way to find out.

Bernice sat up. very carefully. She gritted her teeth and lifted her left leg experimentally. To her surprise and relief, it hardly hurt at all. More of an ache than a pain.

Buoyed up by this little success, Bernice pushed herself to the edge of the bed. Sod the wheelchair, she thought in a fit of bravado. I can bloody walk.

Bernice swung round so that her feet met the floor. She curled her toes in the deep pile of the white carpet.

It was hot in here. Hot and smelly. Better open the window a bit. But to do that, she would have to get over to the other side of the room. She took a deep breath, gripped the handles on the back of the wheelchair and heaved herself upright. Well, almost upright. Her right leg look all her weight, fine, but her left was just this great big dead lump that would not move. Suddenly it gave underneath her and the wheelchair shot forward and collided with her

dressing table, sending bottles of unguents, depilatories and deodorants flying.

And leaving Bernice face down on the floor, fronds of carpet sticking into her mouth, tickling her nose. She rolled over, sneezed, tried to sit up, and pain shot all up her leg and across her back, making her flop on to the carpet, gasping.

Perhaps she should have tried the painkillers.

She lay there staring at the gentle undulations of the white ceiling drapes. From this angle, they looked like the belly of a giant and placid fish. Bernice imagined herself on the seabed, as it swam above her. It meant her no harm. In fact, it would shield her from harm. All she had to do was lie here. She controlled her breathing, and the pain gradually lessened.

Then there was a knock at the door.

‘Come in,’ she yelled. ‘It’s not locked.’

The sound of the door opening. A male cough. The sound of the door closing. A face appeared, swarthy and long-haired against the belly of the fish.

A pirate come to ravish?

Bernice shook her head and blinked a few times.

Donimo. He broke into a smile. ‘Hello there!’

Bernice briskly assessed her current gorgeousness factor. Nil; correction, probably minus several million. She was wearing a grubby yellow T-shirt and white shorts, the left leg of which had been torn to accommodate her polyplaster dressing. Her hair and face must be a mess. She stank of whisky.

‘Donimo,’ she groaned. ‘I don’t want you to see me like this.’

Donimo frowned and cocked his head. ‘I don’t like to ask, but how did you end up in that position?’

‘I tried to walk.’

Donimo crouched down and held her hand. His fingers felt rough and warm. ‘How do you feel?’

‘That’s the trouble. I don’t feel anything. I should be grieving for Maeve.’

‘It’s the shock. You’ve been through a lot.’

'I've been through worse than this,' scowled Bernice.

'You're only human.'

It was a bland platitude, but she could see he was only trying to help. 'Perhaps I've seen so much death that I'm used to it.' She pressed a hand to her chest, as though she wanted to force out the feeling she hoped was inside her. She felt only hard bone, and the thud and swirl of her heart. 'You know that terrible falling, bottomless sensation of grief?'

Donimo looked away from her, across the room at the window. 'I am acquainted with that particular bastard, yes.'

'Well, that's what I should be feeling now.'

'It'll come, at the right time.'

'The right time is *now*,' said Bernice.

Donimo glanced at her. 'Are you sure of that?'

Bernice shook her head. Did she actually want to feel such an all-consumingly horrible emotion? Obviously not. Not right now, anyway. Donimo was probably right.

With an effort, she sat up, reached out and slapped Donimo on the thigh. 'Come on, help me up.'

He lifted her and sat her on the edge of her bed.

'Now help me into the chair.' She glowered at it, ruminating on the strange power that certain inanimate objects could exert over your life. She looked up at Donimo, blowing her fringe from her eyes. 'Nice as it is to see you, what brings you here? Other than the chance to take advantage of my poor broken body.'

'Dieter's called an emergency meeting,' Donimo explained as he helped her into her wheelchair.

'I'd better tidy myself up then,' said Bernice, shifting to get comfortable. She gripped the push-wheels and pushed, with remarkably little effect. 'Blimey, I didn't realize what a bugger this thing is on a deep-pile carpet.' She snapped her fingers in Donimo's direction. 'Wheel me over to my dressing table, and find me a clean T-shirt and trousers. No, skirt. I don't think I'm up to getting into trousers at the moment.'

'Not even mine?' said Donimo, as he pushed her across the room.

She had to smile. At the dressing table, she regarded herself in the mirror. Oh dear. Her face looked puffy, and strands of hair were gummed to her forehead with sweat. She wiped her face and attacked her hair vigorously with a brush.

Donimo returned with her clothes. 'You want me to help you on with them?' Without waiting for an answer he pulled her chair back from the dresser.

'Piss off!' snapped Bernice. 'I haven't sodding finished yet!'

He sprang back. 'Sorry.'

He sounded hurt, and Bernice instantly regretted her quick words. She wheeled herself around to face him. He was sitting on the bed, his expression wary.

'It's me that should be sorry, Donimo. I *am* sorry. It's just this sodding chair. It makes me feel vulnerable. It's as though everybody in the universe is about four feet taller than me. What if we have to abandon ship? What if Maeve's killer came for me?'

'Well, if we had to jump ship, you'd sink like a stone. And as for armed combat, you wouldn't stand a chance against a chipmunk with a cheese grater.'

She made a face at him. 'I'm not afraid. Just pissed off. You know I'm a woman of action.'

'Oh, I know that all right.' He smiled at her. The remark was typical male bullshit. But it was nice to know that even in this slate she was still fanciable. Perhaps he was wondering which positions were possible in a wheelchair.

Well, no time for that at the moment. Even if she had the inclination, which she was pretty sure she didn't.

Bernice struggled into the T-shirt and skirt, helped by Donimo.

'Did the painkillers help?' he asked.

'Didn't take any. Tried the whisky cure instead.'

He grinned. 'I knew you had it!'

Oops. Didn't sound as though he was going to confiscate it, though. 'Didn't work, of course, but at least I have a decent-sized hangover.'

Donimo laughed. 'Come on then, better get you to the dining room. The captain awaits.' He moved to push her. 'Do you want to be pushed, or wheel yourself?'

Bernice had to think about that one. When she wheeled herself, as she had from the sick-bay, she could anticipate the bumps, but when being pushed she couldn't, and every one jolted her spine. But she was knackered. And Donimo was likely to be a more considerate driver than that doctor, so she consented to being pushed.

Donimo wheeled her out of her room and along the carpeted corridor. They came to the dining hall, and Donimo held open the door as Bernice wheeled herself through and up to the table where, a week previously, they had all dined together.

Now, the atmosphere couldn't be more different.

The captain wore a look of shock, as if he couldn't quite believe what was happening on his beloved vessel. Gregor, the doctor, sat next to him, arms folded, looking commendably calm and collected under the circumstances. The Khulayn was also present, sitting immobile, with his claws folded together on the table.

Dr Brion Arvaile was sitting opposite them, his head in his hands. At the sound of Bernice's entrance he looked up, revealing red, puffy eyes. Suddenly Bernice felt even more ashamed of her lack of grief - and, in an obscure way, ashamed of her shame. Brion Arvaile clearly had more important things to think about. She remembered when Maeve and Arvaile had visited her in the sick-bay, the obvious chemistry between them, that they were both clearly trying to deny to themselves. Perhaps he'd been planning to get back with Maeve; he certainly looked like a man who'd seen the wreck of his dreams.

The captain stood up. 'It has been five hours since the - incident,' he said, addressing those gathered around the table. 'You all need to know what actually happened to Professor Ruthven. Dr Arvaile has agreed to tell us, despite his intense personal distress. '

Arvaile shuffled to his feet. He looked positively ill, and his voice was hoarse. 'The thing that killed my wife was the same thing that attacked Bernice.'

'A military bioconstruct,' said Bernice.

Arvaile nodded.

'You seemed certain that it was dead,' said Bernice.

'I was wrong. '

Bernice leant forward in her chair. 'Maybe Violaine hasn't given up on you. Perhaps she's sent a whole army of the things after you.'

Arvaile shrugged. 'If she had, they'd be here now, on this ship.' He stared levelly at Bernice.

There was a brief silence, broken by the captain.

'Dr Arvaile, please continue. Tell us what happened.'

Arvaile looked down at the table. 'I - I saw it happen. Right outside my cabin. It got Maeve instead.' He stopped for a moment, looked at Bernice and then the captain. 'I was in my cabin,' he continued slowly, 'when I heard cries from outside. A woman's cries. Maeve's cries. I went to look, I saw - I saw...' His voice tailed off, and he stared at the table.

'Go on,' said Bernice gently. 'What did you see?'

He turned his dark eyes upon her. 'Maeve,' he said, his voice barely a breath above a whisper. 'Maeve, on the floor. And, standing over her, the bioconstruct. It was damaged,' and I was able to deactivate it and push it over the side. Into the sea. '

'Are you sure it won't be back?' asked Bernice.

'I've destroyed it.' He glared defiantly at Bernice. 'I sent it to the bottom of the sea. It's dead this time. *Dead.*'

Bernice wasn't so sure. The degree of emphasis Arvaile was placing on it sounded an awful lot like wishful thinking. She was about to make another comment, but a look from the captain silenced her.

'Dr Arvaile, I don't believe that you have informed Professor Summerfield of your full status,' he said.

This sounded interesting. 'I thought you were a refugee from the old regime?'

Arvaile shook his head. 'No. I am much more than that. I am - was - an undercover agent for the Resistance on Visphok. '

'Undercover no more, I suppose, now that the Czaritza has been kicked out?' said Bernice.

Arvaile nodded enthusiastically. 'Yes. For over a decade, Violaine has oppressed our people, forced them to follow the Visphoi Ideal. Now we are free. We can develop as a free world.' His voice was trembling with emotion.

'You told me in the sick-bay that you were a Senior Research Scientist under Violaine's regime.'

'And I also told you that I disagreed with their methods, and joined the Resistance. Now they have the benefit of my expertise.'

'No wonder the Czaritza sent a bioconstruct after you,' said Bernice. She leant forward in her wheelchair. 'Are you *absolutely* sure that no more of the things are going to turn up?'

Arvaile shook his head. 'It would have been sent before Violaine was removed from power. I don't think there will be any further danger.'

'But what

'Please, no more questions.' Arvaile sat down suddenly and put his head in his hands again.

Bernice had a strong urge to run over and give him a hug, and probably would have done if she'd been capable of running anywhere. He'd obviously suffered a lot - and he hadn't been able to tell anyone about it. She still didn't like his duplicity - Why couldn't he have *told* Maeve what he was doing? Or perhaps he had, and Maeve had felt bound not to tell anyone the truth, whatever her personal feelings about her husband. After all, telling anyone would be risking his life.

And now Maeve was dead, and Bernice would never know the whole truth.

She only hoped that Arvaile was right about the killer. That there had been only one of them. But she still wondered how he was so sure.



She realized that the captain was speaking again, had been speaking for some time. 'Unfortunately, this area of the Silvasic Sea is contested by the Sylan, Goll and Zhurunti governments. They are currently in - ah - debate over what to do about the incident.'

'What?' said everyone, except the Khulayn, who hissed angrily.

The captain spread his hands and sighed. 'Politics is as confusing to me as it is to you. I've stressed the urgency of the situation, but to no avail.'

'So the cops are not on their way,' said Bernice. 'Oh, great.'

The captain looked even more embarrassed. 'What's more, no one can leave the ship whilst this dispute continues.'

Bernice felt an almost overwhelming sense of irritation. 'Bloody hell! Didn't you bother to check where we were going?'

The captain blinked. 'I assumed St Oscar's had cleared our route with the respective governments.'

Typical. Bloody incompetent St Oscar's administration. She suddenly felt sorry for the captain, caught up in all this in what was supposed to be the relaunch of his dream.

The captain continued. 'The authorities at St Oscar's have been informed of Professor Ruthven's death, and have decided to allow the pilgrimage to continue in deference to our - hmm - Saraani friends.'

The Khulayn raised a claw in acknowledgement.

Bernice narrowed her eyes at it. Him. Her. Whatever. It could well have been the Khulayn, bending over Maeve with that tube going from its mouth into hers. It could have been any of the Saraani - she didn't have time to notice which one it was. She would still very much like to know what had been going on there, but didn't know whether she dared to ask in the present circumstances. Perhaps it was some obscure Saraani medical procedure that hadn't worked. Or perhaps -

Bernice suddenly felt a deep, sick feeling in her gut.

Perhaps Arvaile was lying. Perhaps the Saraani had killed Maeve, and he'd helped. Perhaps he didn't give a damn - or, no, she looked again at his stricken face - he *did* give a damn but hadn't had any choice in the matter.

No. That didn't make any sense either. Why commit a murder outside the sick-bay, of all places?

But Bernice was becoming increasingly sure that there was something critically wrong with Arvaile's story. How could she find out what it was, without arousing suspicion?

Then she remembered her first impulse - to give Arvaile a hug - and began slowly wheeling the chair across the floor towards him. He was still sitting in his chair, looking distractedly at one of the pictures of an ancient sailing vessel on the wall.

'Dr Arvaile? I just wanted to say how sorry I am.' she said quietly.

He didn't move for a while, then turned to her, nodding. 'Thank you.' A shrug. We were separated, but -'

'I know,' said Bernice. She could remember all too well the lengths she'd gone to - the lives she'd risked - to save Jason when she'd thought he was in danger. 'I was just wondering - what happened outside the sick-bay? I didn't understand. Was the Saraani trying to save Maeve's life?'

Arvaile nodded. 'You could say that.' He glanced up nervously, and Bernice suddenly became aware of the Khulayn, standing silently near by.

Her suspicions went into overdrive, but she tried very hard not to let anything show on her face.

'Which Saraani was it?' she asked.

To her surprise, he said, 'Vilbian. It was - he doesn't know -'

'Doesn't know what?'

Arvaile gave her a glance, then a shrug. 'They don't understand human ways, we don't understand theirs. It was just a ceremonial thing. But I thought it would really - could really bring her back -' He stood up suddenly, walked out of the room without another word.

Bernice stared after him for a while. Surely Vilbian wasn't a murderer? But Arvaile's reactions all had 'GUILT' stamped over them in letters ten metres high. He was lying about something — but what?

A claw touched her shoulder, making her jump. She looked down at the Saraani hand, at the long fingers, the leathery skin.

‘Professor Summerfield,’ said the Khulayn quietly, the air whispering eerily in his gills. ‘It is not your place to interfere in Saraani affairs. You have already distressed Dr Arvaile further. Please do not concern yourself with Vilbian’s actions. We will deal with the problem in our own way.’

Bernice looked up at the snout of the Saraani, the white bony brows over its green eyes, and the spines and horns flowing out from the head. They’d always seemed tall - now they seemed almost unnatural, giants from beyond the boundaries of the known universe.

She realized she was afraid. Something about the Khulayn was frightening her.

Nonsense, Summerfield, she told herself. He’s a priest. He’s just looking after his people.

‘And what does “your way” involve?’ she asked carefully. ‘Where is Vilbian?’

But the Khulayn was already walking away. Bernice realized that, for all she knew, Vilbian might be dead.

There was a gentle cough behind her. She turned her head, saw Donimo.

‘Where to next, ma’am?’ he asked. ‘Sauna? Massage? All-over hot mud bath?’

But Bernice wasn’t in the mood for jollity. ‘I don’t know, Don,’ she said. ‘I really don’t know.’

## NOT ONLY LOVE CAN BREAK YOUR HEART

Bernice sat in her wheelchair, in an evil mood. Donimo had wheeled her back to her cabin, and then gone to set up the arrangements for Maeve's memorial service. She could tell from his face that he'd been glad to get away from her, despite his kind words and attentions.

Bernice wanted to help, to do something, to make up for her lack of feeling over Maeve.

Something. Anything. Even something yukky and obvious like making up a big bunch of flowers with a sentimental message.

She looked around. The huge bed, the clothes strewn over the floor, the white wardrobe. No flowers. Well, she could always have a drink. Maeve would have understood that, at least.

She wheeled herself over to the wardrobe and opened the door. She rummaged in the pile of clothes for the unopened bottle of Chateau Yquatine.

Her hand closed around it and drew it out.

But it had already been opened. The cork had been drawn half out of the thin blue neck by a corkscrew. Not just any old corkscrew, but a corkscrew with its handle fashioned out of bulbous blue plastic.

She'd seen something like this before. But where? Then it hit her. The Saraani. Vilbian!

How had he got in here? You could only get in a cabin if you had the correct validation card. Or knew how to fool the scanner in the lock - but the Saraani were known to be averse to the use of high technology.

Another mystery. Perhaps he'd wished it open with the power of prayer.

Then Bernice noticed that impaled on the corkscrew was a tiny note. She wheeled herself to her dressing table, popped out the cork and gazed at the piece of paper. It read, in spidery handwriting:

*Come to the carousel. Alone. I need your help. v*

Bernice plonked the bottle down on the dressing table.

Vilbian wanted to see her. That meant he had something to tell her. Perhaps he knew who had killed Maeve. Perhaps he'd killed her himself.

Should she tell the captain? Bernice screwed up the note. No. She wanted to solve this on her own.

Could Vilbian have been - as she'd first supposed - performing a strange and secret Saraani medical procedure upon Maeve, which had failed? And then gone into hiding, confused and afraid - afraid that he would be charged with the murder?

Whatever had happened, she was going to find out. Bernice took a swig of wine, straight from the bottle.

But only one swig. If she found Vilbian, she was going to have some serious talking to do.

'The question is, do we lobby the captain to take us back to St Oscar's, despite the political situation, or permit this voyage to continue, possibly at great hazard to ourselves?' Professor Smith was addressing all of his colleagues in the lecture hall. Well, almost all. Dr Arvaile had said he wanted some time to himself, which was understandable, and Professor Summerfield was nowhere to be found, as usual.

'I think we should trust the captain,' said Professor Southernay, his face pale and drawn, he'd been looking this bad ever since the news of Professor Ruthven's death. 'He knows what he's doing.'

Professor Ingerskjold was smoking a cigarette. Not many people indulged in this habit, even though these days cigarettes contained no harmful substances whatsoever. Perhaps now the danger had gone from smoking, so had the thrill. Or perhaps people couldn't get addicted to non-

nicotine cigarettes. But was nicotine an actual physical addiction or a mere craving? Smith shook his head. No time for theorizing now. 'What do you think, Martine?'

Professor Ingerskjold exhaled blue smoke, which rose in lazy clouds to the grey ceiling. 'If there's even a chance that more of these things are around, then we should be evacuated to safety. What the Saraani and the crew do is up to them, but we came along to study, not to risk our lives.'

Interesting, thought Smith. The male was placing his trust in the local authority figure - Captain Fontana - whilst the female was advocating a move to a safer position; an atavistic attitude, traceable to the female need to protect her offspring.

'Well, what do you think?' asked Professor Ingerskjold, breaking into his thoughts.

'Atavistic, but entirely sensible, your idea,' said Smith. 'Do you have any offspring?'

Professor Ingerskjold's eyes widened.

'We can't evacuate. We'll be shot by the Goll or the Zhurunti if we try to leave!' wailed Professor Southernay.

Smith snorted. 'They would never shoot us. Arrest us, maybe - but at least then we'd be out of danger.'

Professor Ingerskjold stubbed out her cigarette. 'So I take it that you agree with me.'

'Your option would seem the most sensible,' said Smith hesitantly. This provoked a mini-argument between Ingerskjold and Southernay, which Smith sat back and quietly observed.

He'd only met them in the briefing before the trip. Their paths had never had reason to cross until now. They specialized in the natural sciences; he specialized in behavioural science. Their department buildings were on separate islands. Professor Southernay was just as he seemed: a gentle man, totally devoted to his work. He was ageing but still active, short and slim, with a bald head dusted with white stubble, and little round glasses which made him look slightly goggle-eyed.

Martine Ingerskjold was more of a puzzle. A climatologist, yet she dressed like a socialite. She was over fifty, her eyes

were very blue, her piercing stare enhanced by a lot of eyeshadow. Her hair was bottle-blonde, with black and grey mixed in. Strikingly attractive. A strong and forceful personality.

But one of Smith's specialities was Social Interaction. Nothing anyone said or did could intimidate him, because everything anyone ever said or did could be traceable to any number of sociological, behavioural or atavistic conditionings they themselves could never be aware of.

Professor Ingerskjold was now trying to browbeat Professor Southernay into agreeing with her. Professor Southernay was standing his ground - he was more stubborn than he looked. To Smith, they looked like a bickering couple.

Smith was struck by an idea. Gender politics were an area of perennial interest with him. And women and their reactions were one of his favourite areas of research. On this trip, he'd had ample opportunities to develop his theories. Firstly, he'd tried suggestive comments to Professor Ruthven. He felt no guilt over this now, as it had been in the legitimate pursuance of knowledge. When he'd tried the same with Professor Summerfield he had received short shrift. Of course, the attack on the beach had changed everything. It had seemed to bring him closer to Summerfield. He'd quite hit it off with her when they both lay in the sick-bay, he thought. She'd even asked him out for a drink, in a roundabout sort of way. Pity she never turned up to their meetings.

That left Professor Ingerskjold.

Obviously, advances were out of the question. She was far too old and, he knew, of the wrong sexual orientation.

So, clearly, he had to try another tactic.

What if he, Smith, decided to side with the male - Professor Southernay - against the female - Professor Ingerskjold - and see what happened? And then in the next meeting, reverse the process.

Smith cut into Ingerskjold and Southernay's discussion. 'Sensible, but impractical.'

'What?' said Professor Ingerskjold.

'Your idea, to evacuate. Not practical. We all have studies to complete, grants to secure. We should stay. The proper authorities have everything under control.'

Southernay was nodding.

Smith watched Martine Ingerskjold closely.

'These meetings are becoming increasingly pointless,' she said. Irritation was evident in her tone. She gathered up her bag and cigarettes and walked out.

'Next meeting's tomorrow,' called Smith after her retreating back. 'After the memorial service for Professor Ruthven.'

Professor Ingerskjold turned round, her face grim. 'Have you got any feelings at all?'

'Yes, many,' began Smith, but she stormed out and slammed the door.

'What's the matter with her?' said Smith. He knew; it was all his fault, but he'd done it deliberately and now watched for Southernay's reaction.

'You're the matter, not her,' said Southernay, getting up to leave.

Interesting.

Professor Smith couldn't wait until the next meeting.

It had taken Bernice only a few minutes flipping through the *Lady of Lorelei's* brochure to discover where and what the carousel was. It had taken her a bit longer to trundle down in the wheelchair, through a complex series of corridors, ramps, lifts and two awkward and almost insurmountable little half-steps, to arrive at the children's play area on C Deck.

This was evidently one of the parts of the ship that hadn't been refurbished. Dim lighting threw everything into monochrome shadows. There was almost total silence. Bernice could have been alone on a ghost ship. The double doors to the play area depicted a big, leering pirate's face. The pirate was wearing an eyepatch and his hook was raised in roguish greeting. He had a parrot on his shoulder. He reminded her of Donimo - rather a lot. She'd have to ask him about that later.

She pushed her way through the doors, which were more like curtains - thick strips of multicoloured plastic hanging



from the ceiling. They rustled and scraped against her elbows as she squeezed through the gap. Inside, it was a forlorn place, with all the rides covered in dusty tarpaulins. Plastic packing crates, litter and bits of rope were strewn everywhere. Cobwebs hung from the ceiling, and from the hollowly laughing faces of animatronic clowns, pixies and more pirates (these were less like Donimo - perhaps the first one had been just a chance resemblance). The walls were covered in a once-gaudy mural, the colours faded and peeling; it looked strangely obscene in the dim light. A deflated bouncy castle slumped against the far wall like the decaying internal organ of some giant sea monster.

Bernice suddenly felt vulnerable. There were many hiding places, many shadows, many lurking shapes. She couldn't move very fast. If someone or something wanted to get her, she was dead. She shrank down into the chair, trying to merge with the shadows, shivering in the unheated air of the room.

She rounded the edge of an elephantine shape draped in a tarpaulin, and something came into view. Something large, and circular, and peopled with bizarre figures. Bernice wheeled herself cautiously closer, squinting at the strange shapes - humped and finned figures that looked like the results of some bizarre genetic experiment.

Genetic experiments. Arvaile. Bloody hell -

Then she realized that she was looking not at anything that had ever been alive, but at the carousel. Cripes on toast, Summerfield, she thought, what's got into you? You'll be running away from your own shadow next!

Now that she knew what she was seeing, it was easy to understand what the bizarre shapes really were. Carrying on the rather overstated nautical theme of the *Lady of Lorelei* (as if the designers wanted to continually remind the passengers that they were on *a ship* on the sea), it featured a parade of anthropomorphized sea creatures. Sea horses rubbed fins with grinning dolphins, which followed busty mermaids, rather small whales, sharks (wearing shades), lobsters and squids in an endless roundelay of undersea jollity.

It took her a while to notice another shape, angular and blue-robed, its long, horned head leaning against the midriff of a mermaid.

‘Vilbian?’ said Bernice, wheeling forward gently.

Vilbian’s head jerked up quickly.

‘Benny?’ he fluted, the baritone echo from his gills sounding unnaturally loud.

She wheeled herself right up to him. He was clutching a bottle. She didn’t recognize the contents, but guessed that it contained a high proportion of alcohol.

Vilbian’s head weaved from side to side as he tried to focus on her, and his tongue protruded a little from his mouth aperture.

He was obviously drunk.

‘Vilbian,’ said Bernice, ‘I got your note. I think -’ She hesitated, unsure whether to commit herself, then decided that she’d have to, now that she’d come this far. ‘I think that the Khulayn is looking for you. He seemed angry about whatever it was you were doing to Maeve.’

Vilbian’s head swung slowly from side to side. ‘I’m an outcast.’

‘What?’

Vilbian placed a clawed hand on her shoulder. ‘You cannot understand.’

Bernice was sick of people telling her she didn’t understand. ‘Look. You summoned me down here for a reason. You said you needed my help. Well, I can only help you if you tell me what’s going on. So, what’s going on?’

Vilbian passed her the bottle. It was square, with a blue label, and the liquid inside looked clear.

Bernice took the bottle from Vilbian. She frowned at the label. ‘Zchnetzoar? What’s that?’

‘Something called “vodka”.’

‘Aha. I know the drink, but not this brand.’ Bernice took a swig. The vodka was strong, with a flavour which lay somewhere between liquorice and shoe polish. ‘Nice,’ she croaked, placing the bottle in her lap and holding it steady. ‘But I don’t think you’d better have any more, for now.’ She paused. ‘You realize I am going to have to turn you in to the captain.’

She held her breath, hoping Vilbian wouldn't call her bluff.

He didn't. He uttered a hoot of dismay and almost fell off the carousel.

'Look, as far as I'm concerned, you're a murder suspect,' she went on, feeling cruel but knowing she had no choice. She had to get the truth out of Vilbian. 'Arvaile claims he's killed this bioconstruct but I don't believe him. I don't even know whether it was ever on board the ship. Now, I'm willing to believe you're innocent, but you must explain to me what happened outside the sick-bay.'

Vilbian hummed through his gills, a low droning sound like a distant aeroplane. To understand what has happened, you must first understand about the Saraani religious Way. About Holy Transference, communion, and Holy Instruction.'

'Vilbian, I'm not here for a sermon! What has all that to do with Maeve?'

'Everything. Please, you must listen. You must understand.' His voice had dropped to a whisper, echoing like rustling autumn leaves around the carousel, the background hum from his gills like a low, keening wind.

'All right,' said Bernice. She sat back in her wheelchair and listened as Vilbian spoke, his tongue flicking out occasionally.

'You already know that we Saraani only live one lifetime - ten of your years. There are no years on Saraanis, only lifetimes. When the time comes, we grow old very quickly, wither and die.'

'Unlike us humans,' reflected Bernice. 'The last third of our lives is spent withering and dying.'

Vilbian looked at her quizzically. 'I cannot imagine that. Surely a being's life should be healthy, right up until the very end?'

Bernice shrugged. 'It's our biology. We have to live with it. Anyway, aren't there accidents on Saraanis? Diseases?'

'We have eliminated most diseases, and accidents are rare. Most Saraani die of old age. A Saraani knows when his time is due, and, before the end, he makes a pilgrimage to a special Temple in his birth town, known as the Temple of

Ending. This pilgrimage must be made alone, and can take several days.'

'That sounds tough. When you're dying, I mean.'

'It is the Way. Once at the Temple of Ending, the dying Saraani will meet with one who has been waiting and fasting for the duration of the pilgrimage. They both go into the Chamber of Ending, and the dying Saraani lies upon the Stone of Ending. The other then performs Holy Transference.' Vilbian stopped and looked at Bernice, green eyes gleaming.

'Holy Transference,' repeated Bernice. 'You mentioned that before. What's it got to do with Maeve?'

'It's what I did to Maeve.'

Bernice thought back to the sick-bay, to Vilbian with Maeve, the tube connecting their mouths like a grotesque, distended white tongue. She didn't like the way this conversation was going one bit. 'That tube thing... what was it?'

In answer, Vilbian flexed his mandibles and extruded the white tube. The sight of it made Bernice's scalp prickle. It was thicker than the Saraani's tongue, about as thick as a dinner-table candle. Its smooth, white surface shone wetly in the gloom, like the skin of a maggot. Hundreds of tiny fibres protruded from the end, each one thinner than a hair. They waved slowly in the air like the fronds of some undersea creature. Vilbian retracted the - thing - and then spoke. 'The end of the probe weaves into the brain stem. We can take the minds of the dying into our own.'

'And so you...' Bernice's voice tailed away as she realized what Vilbian had just said. She stared at the blind smile of the mermaid, felt the cold hard glass of the vodka bottle against the skin of her hand.

*Vilbian had taken Maeve's mind inside his own.*

*She was still alive.*

Bernice remembered Arvaile's words - 'I won't let her be dead.'

Vilbian was still talking, as though reciting a lesson, apparently oblivious to Bernice's shock. 'The act of Holy Transference triggers fertilization. Then the parent enters a

period of communion with the mind. It allows the personality of the dead Saraani to fade and ripen. As the time for birth nears, the parent makes a pilgrimage to a Temple of Beginning, where the child is born. The parent makes physical contact once more, instilling the young Saraani with all the knowledge and experience of the dead Saraani. This is called Holy Instruction.'

Bernice waved a hand to shut him up. She could hardly take in the implications of what he was saying. She blinked. Tears were pricking her eyes and her heart was thumping. 'You mean, Maeve's mind is - in your mind?'

Vilbian nodded. 'I was on my way to the sick-bay when I found Arvaile with Maeve. She was dying. He urged me to perform Holy Transference on her. I was confused, I had never seen a dying alien before. So I did what he asked.'

Bernice was piecing things together. 'Maeve's body has been flown back to St Oscar's and cryogenically frozen. Arvaile thought -' she swallowed Arvaile must have thought that she could live again, through Holy Instruction.'

Vilbian hissed. 'I would never do such a thing! I already face excommunication for what I have done. That's why the Khulayn is angry. It is forbidden to perform Holy Transference on aliens - because -' Vilbian raised his head to the clam shell of the carousel and let forth an ululating wail. The sound chilled Bernice.

Then the realization struck her, and chilled her even more. She finished Vilbian's sentence for him, though he probably couldn't hear her. 'Because you're pregnant.'

Vilbian's wail echoed around the children's play area, like a nuclear age siren announcing an air-raid. Announcing the end of the world.

Bernice stared at his spiny head, trying to take in the implications of what she'd just heard. If she understood right, because of their brief lifespans, evolution had granted the Saraani a form of reincarnation.

No wonder they were so secretive.

She was full of questions. 'Vilbian -'

'Don't move!'

The sudden voice made Bernice drop the bottle, which smashed on the floor, sending a small lake of vodka sliding around the wheels of her chair and Vilbian's feet.

'Shit!' she swore, twisting round.

In the dim light, she could see a figure approaching them. It was pointing a rather large gun right at Vilbian's head.

## THE SECOND BORN IS DEAD

Bernice looked around for a weapon, anything, as the figure stepped closer.

But the bottle was the only thing that she could remotely have used - and that lay in jagged pieces on the floor.

'Who's there?' she called.

The figure stepped forward. A shaft of dusty light illuminated a lined, moustached, serious face.

Bernice breathed a sigh of relief. 'Captain! Do you have to go creeping around scaring people?'

He didn't smile. 'What's been going on here?'

Bernice glanced at Vilbian. He didn't seem to have noticed the captain.

'Vilbian asked me down here. He had something to tell me. How did you find us?' Although she was more interested in why.

'I used this.' The captain waved the gun at them. Bernice peered at it. Oh, it wasn't a gun, it was a heat sensor. 'It's for detecting rodents in the ship's ventilation system, but it's equally good at tracking down - ah - larger creatures. Sorry, but the Khulayn was getting very anxious about the whereabouts of Pilgrim Vilbian here. We thought he might be dead.' He stepped closer, skirting around the pool of vodka, and peered at Vilbian slumped on the carousel. 'Is he all right?'

'No, he's not all right,' Bernice whispered. 'In fact, I don't think I'd better explain anything until we're alone.'

'Tell him,' fluted Vilbian suddenly. 'Tell him everything.'

Bernice looked at Vilbian. 'Are you sure?'

'Tell him.' His voice was defiant. 'He must understand.'

‘OK.’ Bernice told the captain all that she’d learnt from Vilbian. The captain asked a few questions, which Bernice could answer - and then one which she couldn’t.

‘So Maeve’s mind is conscious, inside his mind?’

‘Good question,’ said Bernice. ‘Vilbian?’ she asked gently. ‘Is Maeve conscious? Does she know what is going on?’

Vilbian shook his head. ‘No. Communion is like a shared dream. The mind of the dead dreams awhile, inside the mind of the living. It is thought that consciousness ceases with death.’

So, to all intents and purposes, Maeve was dead. Still dead. And aware in the same way that you’re aware when you dream.

Or when you have a nightmare.

Bernice shivered. ‘What will happen to Maeve’s mind now?’

‘If it was a Saraani mind, I would commune with it, and perform Holy Instruction on my newborn, which would then instantly understand every ritual, know the location of every temple, comprehend every text, and be at one with Saraani history.’

‘But because it is a human mind - sorry, I’m trying to understand all this,’ said the captain, ‘- you can’t do that?’

Vilbian shook his head. ‘I have performed Holy Transference and given birth once before.’ His head drooped. ‘My child joined the Renaissants. And now I am destined to lose another child.’

His words echoed around the children’s play area. Bernice felt a wave of sadness. Did Vilbian know what this place was? How grotesquely ironic it was, in the circumstances?

She had no idea what to say to him. What do you say to a pregnant alien whose child is going to be lost because the parent is carrying the wrong set of race memories? The Saraani life-style was simply beyond human experience. Transferring the memories of your dead relative to your newborn child had no referent in human society. The nearest, she supposed, was the old oral tradition of handing down history, but that was very primitive compared to the Saraani way. Like comparing down-loading wetware files to



writing with chalk on a slate board. And it could have nothing like the same emotional and spiritual significance. An idea struck Bernice. 'Vilbian, you mentioned something called "communion" a minute ago. Can you "commune" with Maeve's mind?'

Vilbian glared at her. 'Why would I do such a thing? What I have done is wrong enough.'

'You might be able to discover something about how she died.'

Vilbian inclined his head. 'Her mind is closed. Alien. I do not know if communion is possible.'

'Will you try it?'

The captain looked at her, clearly puzzled. We know about Maeve's death. I don't see the need to —'

There was a movement behind the carousel. The captain spun round, and stood staring as the Khulayn walked up to them, followed by half a dozen Saraani. They towered above Bernice in her chair, but she refused to be intimidated.

'Quite a popular place this, Cap,' she whispered. 'Sorry, all rides are closed today!' she said aloud.

We have come for Vilbian,' intoned the Khulayn.

'No!' hooted Vilbian, standing up suddenly. Saraani shoved past Bernice and pushed him against the wall.

'I demand to know what you're going to do!' shouted the captain.

The Khulayn turned on him. 'You invited us on to your planet. What you are about to see may disturb you. But it is necessary.'

Vilbian was pinned against the wall by two of the other Saraani. He struggled, tongue lashing out rapidly.

Bernice grabbed her push-wheels and made to move towards him, but a Saraani held her back. 'Let me go!' she yelled, watching helpless as the Khulayn strode up to Vilbian. He placed a clawed hand on his head, between his horns, and another over his gills. Vilbian's struggles intensified, and then he went limp. The other Saraani closed in on him, obscuring her view with their cloaked backs.

The captain was hovering uncertainly on the edge of the group. 'Do something!' she yelled at him.

He spread his hands and shook his head.

Couldn't interfere in Saraani rituals, could he? Damn him!

Now the Khulayn was uttering a series of high chirruping sounds. The other Saraani were humming in unison, a rising and falling tone which made Bernice feel queasy. The noise the Khulayn was making escalated to a chittering, like metal legs across glass.

Then the Saraani stood back to reveal the cowering form of Vilbian, hands over his head, forcing himself up against the wall.

The Khulayn's cries reached a crescendo - and then stopped.

The Saraani stopped humming at exactly the same time.

There was silence.

Vilbian began to shake violently, his limbs jerking spasmodically, his eyes blinking rapidly. He uttered a series of moans and grunts, the sound of a creature at the limits of pain.

Bernice went to wheel herself towards him, but the Saraani was still holding her back.

She had to get to Vilbian, comfort him, as evidently his fellow beings would not.

Bernice half stood, half stumbled out of her chair just as Vilbian screamed - a high, almost-human sound which chilled Bernice's blood. She fell to the cold floor, arms outstretched, ignoring the pain in her leg. She watched helplessly as milky fluid gushed from between Vilbian's legs, soiling his robe. The liquid steamed and pooled on the floor, its edge merging with the vodka lake. An overpowering smell filled the air, sickly and sour like long-dead meat mixed with rotten eggs. Bernice felt her stomach heave.

Vilbian slumped to the floor, still and silent.

Bernice rolled over to look at the Khulayn. 'What have you done? Is he dead?'

The Khulayn strode over to her, his every movement seemingly indifferent. 'No, of course not. The child has been aborted.'

Bernice looked up at the Khulayn, his elongated head appearing huge and grotesque in the gloom. How could a civilized creature do what he had just done to Vilbian?

The Khulayn made a sweeping gesture, and two Saraani carried Vilbian out of the play area.

‘What’s going to happen to him?’ said Bernice.

‘The ceremony to exorcize the alien mind within him is complex. It will be performed in the greenhouse area. You,’ he pointed at the captain and Bernice, ‘will keep away.’

The Khulayn then turned and left, followed by the remaining Saraani.

Bernice grabbed the wheels of her chair, and made as if to follow them, but this time it was the captain who held her back.

‘What are you doing?’ she cried. ‘We’ve got to stop this from happening. It’s cruel, it’s degrading -’

The captain averted his face. ‘We have to respect their culture.’

Bernice had had enough of the captain’s deference to the Saraani. ‘Look, if Vilbian can commune with Maeve’s mind, he might be able to find out more about the circumstances of her death.’

‘I can’t permit it!’

‘It’s almost as if you don’t want to find out,’ she said evenly. ‘What have you got to hide, Captain?’

The captain straightened up. ‘I have nothing to hide. I’m quite satisfied with Arvaile’s explanation.’

‘No you’re not.’

The captain looked away. ‘I’m also afraid of losing my ship. What’s already happened is bad enough. I don’t want to risk any more - conflicts -’ He trailed off miserably.

Bernice remembered what Donimo had told her about the captain. The loss of his wife, being confined to one planet, his sentimental but understandable attachment to the *Lady of Lorelei*.

She thought for a moment, then said, ‘You don’t want to lose the ship, right? Well, what do you think will happen if it turns out that Arvaile is lying, and you didn’t do anything

about it? Don't you think we ought to try and find out the truth?'

The captain shook his head. 'I don't know.'

Bernice laid a hand on his arm. He felt stiff, starched. So repressed. 'Captain,' she said softly. We could be harbouring a murderer. Do you think we should take that chance?'

The captain looked away from her. She could almost see his thought processes: keeping his Saraani paymasters happy, or protecting the passengers from a murderer and avoiding a major incident which would probably put the *Lady of Lorelei* out of business for good.

The captain nodded, tight-lipped. 'You're right. It's about time I told the Khulayn who's in charge of this ship.'

Mirrium stood on the sun deck, staring out to sea. It was a beautiful sight, an endless, glittering mantle of water, with no land visible at all. Mirrium didn't need much water to live - his body recycled its waste products efficiently — and the sight of this vast sea was hypnotizing. He could almost believe that he was on a planet made entirely of water.

Almost entirely. Mirrium remembered the island. The good island they had left behind, because the Khulayn had said it wasn't right for their purposes. When would they reach the next one?

Suddenly the vast water didn't seem so wonderful. He could only live on the land, after all. His child could only be born on the land.

But perhaps they should build the Temples within the sound of waves . . .

There came a hooting from inside the greenhouse, interrupting his thoughts.

'They've found Vilbian!'

Mirrium walked inside and descended the steps, as quickly as he could without stumbling. At the foot, on the boulevard. Pilgrim Zyquill was waiting for him. 'They've found Vilbian. He's performed Holy Transference on an alien!'

Mirrium could hardly believe it. He held on to Zyquill's arm to steady himself.

‘What has Vilbian come to?’ he said at last. But any remark seemed inadequate.

They hurried down the tiled boulevard towards the Khulayn. There was Vilbian, on a stretcher, unconscious. Mirrium could smell that the egg had been aborted. The smell made him feel sick, but he knew it was the only thing that could have been done.

But the alien mind would still be inside Vilbian. Now it had to be driven out, or the entire Saraani species would be polluted. And doing that would take all of them. Every pilgrim, working together with the Khulayn to destroy the evil.

As he watched the Khulayn and his helpers carry Vilbian over to a stone altar set some distance away from the boulevard, Mirrium found himself wondering what it would feel like to perform Holy Transference on an alien. And communing with an alien mind - how would that change your own mind?

Mirrium jolted in shock as he realized what he was thinking about. Was he, too, becoming infected by the strangeness of this new world, by the heresies that seemed to grow like a fungus in the damp alien air? He quickly glanced around, wondering if the others could tell what he was thinking.

Vilbian was coming round. His head was rolling from side to side and he was moaning. Along with the others. Mirrium crowded closer to hear what he was saying. Vilbian’s eyes flicked open. ‘My child,’ he moaned, and Mirrium felt a chill shiver down his spine.

Mirrium was carrying an egg. He knew how he would feel if it was aborted, and felt a pang of sympathy for Vilbian.

No. No sympathy. What was he thinking? Heresies again.

Mirrium expected Vilbian to struggle but the heretic allowed them to fasten the straps around his arms and legs and neck, seeming to accept what was happening to him.

‘Your child is no more,’ said the Khulayn. ‘You must have known that it would be so, when you performed Holy Transference on the alien.’

Mirrium had to ask it. 'Why did you perform this most forbidden of acts?'

He felt the others watching him, watching Vilbian.

Vilbian's eye locked with his. 'Dr Arvaile asked me to. I was confused, almost before I knew it, I was performing Holy Transference.'

An outraged murmur rippled through the assembled Saraani.

'You know how the process takes over once it is started,' said Vilbian. 'Intellect and reason fly, and instinct takes over. I had never seen a dying alien before.'

Mirrium could hardly believe that it could be an accident. A perversion of nature like this! What was wrong with Vilbian's mind, that he could allow such perverse 'instincts' to rise to the surface?

*The same thing as is wrong with your own mind. This world...*

Mirrium waved his head from side to side, tasting the air with his tongue. Salt. The taste of heresy.

We shall question the humans about this Dr Arvaile's motives,' said the Khulayn. 'But now, Pilgrim Vilbian, we must help you extinguish the alien mind. And then we will discuss your excommunication.'

'I am prepared to face whatever fate awaits me.' Vilbian's voice was weak, but concentrated, like a single candle flame in a dark place.

Mirrium took his place in the circle of Saraani around the altar. Vilbian lay still. Mirrium was aching to ask what it felt like to bear an alien mind, but knew he could not, must not. He was carrying within him the mind of Yijioll, a maker of water-murals. Mirrium loved water-murals. Their purpose was to sanctify water for use in various ceremonies, such as Holy Instruction and the Washing of the Newborn. Channels and chutes, water-wheels and spirals of glass would send water cascading and tinkling between two large circular sheets of glass. Unutterably beautiful. Yijioll's mind now dreamt inside Mirrium's, and Mirrium could sense his presence always there like the burblings and tricklings of one of his water-murals. Very soon. Mirrium's child would be

born, and be instilled with all Yijioll's race memories, at the new Temple of Beginning they would consecrate on one of the islands. Perhaps the child would grow to be as proficient a craftsman as Yijioll.

'Pilgrims,' said the Khulayn. 'Let us join together to cast out the alien within Vilbian.' He stood behind Vilbian and placed his hands on either side of Vilbian's head, covering his eyes. 'Let us begin.'

Together with the other Saraani, Mirrium began the intonations which would set up the necessary spiritual resonance in Vilbian's mind and destroy the alien intruder.

But somehow, somewhere, deep inside himself, there persisted the salt tang of doubt: should he be doing this?

## AUDIENCE WITH THE MIND

Donimo stepped back from the inner door of the lobby and shook his head. It's no use. They've set the manual lock from the inside. Same as the other end. They must really want to keep us out.'

'Damn!' hissed Bernice. 'We're going to have to find another way in.'

They'd tried going through the Saraani cabins, but the entrance to that section had been locked as well. That left them with one option. 'We're going to have to smash our way in,' said Bernice.

'I cannot allow...' began the captain, tailing off as Bernice gave him a stern look. 'Oh, very well.'

Bernice watched Donimo heave a fire extinguisher from the wall. 'This baby weighs a ton,' he gasped.

'Good. Then it'll do its job.' Bernice wheeled her chair out of the lobby and around to the large pane of smooth blue glass next to it. She pressed her face to its sun-warmed surface. 'Can't see anyone.'

'OK. Stand back.' Donimo hefted the fire extinguisher over his head, standing to one side of the doomed pane of glass.

Bernice let the captain pull her chair back, and shaded her eyes against the magnesium-bright glare of the sun reflecting on the glass, bracing herself for the sound of impact.

\* \* \*

The sound of breaking glass jolted Mirrium from his trance.

*Blue glass breaking — spires falling - temples wrecked.,  
orangestone crumbling to choking dust -*

He opened his eyes.

He was in the greenhouse, on the ship, on the watery planet. He breathed out heavily, his gills thrumming. For a



moment it had been real, he had been back on Saraanis, reliving his experience of the revolution.

But the sound he had heard had also been real. Here, in the present. He was sure of that. And this building was constructed of glass.

Were they under attack?

Vilbian was on the altar, oblivious to everything. The Khulayn had taken his hands from his head, the ceremony abandoned. The other Saraani were looking around for the source of the sound.

'There!' Zyquill pointed, and Mirrium looked. Two humans were advancing across the grass, pushing something between them. Only when they reached the boulevard did Mirrium realize that the something was a third human, in some sort of wheeled contrivance. It was the one who had been injured. Professor Summerfield. The other two were the captain and one of the officers. Mirrium recognized their pale-blue tunics.

How dare they interrupt the ceremony!

He caught a whiff of salt air, drawn in through the broken glass.

The Khulayn strode up to meet the trio of humans, the other Saraani forming a crescent enclosing them. 'I forbid you to enter this area.'

One of the humans spoke - to Mirrium's surprise. Professor Summerfield, and not the captain. Obviously, these humans did not respect their rightful leaders as Saraani did. We can't let you destroy Maeve's mind. Not without finding out how she died first.'

'We want Vilbian to commune with Professor Ruthven's mind,' said the captain.

'I cannot allow that,' said the Khulayn, raising his head in a defiant stance. 'And neither would Professor Ruthven, were she still alive,' he continued. 'She knew and respected our sacred Ways.'

'Bollocks,' said Professor Summerfield (invoking a human deity, maybe?). 'I'm not satisfied with the explanations we've had about how she died. Vilbian is our only chance to find out whether Arvaile is telling the truth.'

Mirrium was bewildered. Did none of these humans trust one another? How did they live, in such a confusion of suspicions and lies?

‘Please, Khulayn,’ said the captain. ‘It’s the only way of getting to the truth.’

‘The answer is still no,’ said the Khulayn.

‘In that case,’ said the captain, his voice hardening, ‘this pilgrimage is at an end. I’m turning the *Lady of Lorelei* right round and we’re going back to St Oscar’s.’

The Khulayn hissed, and the other Saraani murmured in alarm.

Anger surged through Mirrium. How devious these humans were!

He started humming through his gills, a low, droning sound. Some of his fellows began to follow suit. It was the sound for driving out evil spirits. The humans weren’t to know that, but they looked suitably disconcerted.

The captain turned to the black-haired officer. ‘Donimo, go to the bridge and initiate the necessary course corrections.’

Mirrium’s heart sank. So, the pilgrimage was to end. They had no choice; the alien mind had to die. Mirrium hummed louder, as did the other Saraani.

‘Silence, pilgrims!’ hooted the Khulayn.

Mirrium stopped at once, relieved that the Khulayn had taken the lead in the proper way once more.

The Khulayn inclined his head to the captain. ‘I agree to your proposal. But you will gain nothing from this but our enmity for perverting the Saraani Way.’

Mirrium couldn’t quite believe what he had just heard.

‘I also agree to this,’ said Vilbian, surprising Mirrium. How long had he been conscious? ‘Now I have Professor Ruthven’s mind, what harm would there be in communion?’

Mirrium stared at him. There would be *great* harm. The whole religious Way would crumble, if everyone thought as Vilbian did! Why, the way he was speaking was almost Renaissant...

‘But I will only do this if my excommunication is revoked,’ said Vilbian.

Now *Vilbian* was being devious! Was the air of this planet making them like the humans?

The Khulayn nodded assent, and turned away, as if shrugging off the vast implications of what had just occurred.

Mirrium watched, tongue flicking agitatedly around his mouth aperture, as two Saraani unstrapped Vilbian and carried him off to his cabin. The humans looked pleased; they had got their way. Was this going to be the price of sanctuary on this planet - the relentless erosion of Saraani culture?

Mirrium realized that he couldn't allow it whatever the Khulayn might say. The Khulayn was wrong - the salt air of Dellah was affecting his mind, loo. The communion had to be stopped.

Slowly, painfully, Mirrium realized that he was going to have to be the one to do it.

Bernice wheeled herself into Maeve's cabin. It wasn't as luxurious as her own. It was a lot neater; there were no clothes strewn about the place, the bed was tidy, and the pale yellow curtains were drawn neatly across the window.

She'd come here to try to kindle some feeling. Try to kick-start the grieving process. But the mere fact that she could think so coldly, so calculatingly, made her wonder if she would ever feel anything about the death of her friend. Perhaps she just hadn't known her long enough. But why should that make any difference?

Bernice wheeled around slowly, looking for signs of Maeve. Something. Anything.

On the dressing table, she found a small, dog-eared notebook. She picked it up, instantly feeling like an intruder.

It was filled with notes in Maeve's tiny, neat handwriting:

Although the Saraani had been religious for thousands of years, there were always dissenters - though they like to be called 'Renaissants'. As if they were ushering in a new age (huh!). Eventually, the Renaissants took over, expelling the religious orders from Saraanis. Why? Why could they not live side by side? Surely a planet is big enough?

Bernice closed the notebook, and thought about, not Maeve, but what Vilbian had told her. The long pilgrimages, the Temples of Ending, the Temples of Beginning. All birth and death on Saraanis were controlled by ritual. No wonder the Renaissants had revolted - it's a bit like the Church saying that sexual intercourse is holy and should only be performed in a certain way after a period of fasting and pilgrimage. What had happened on Saraanis was a humanist revolution. They had got sick and tired of being told what to do, and at last done something about it. Good for them. Bernice suddenly felt the desire to meet one of these Renaissants, hear their side of the story. Perhaps, when she got back to St Oscar's, she could mount an expedition to Saraanis.

Bernice read on:

But I feel there is something missing, something that I don't know about this race, around whose lives their whole religion revolves. Why do they go on these long pilgrimages to give birth? Why are there no Saraani texts, not even a prayer book?

Bernice realized that Maeve had not known about Holy Transference, and never would now. Never would know anything now.

So how do you feel about that, Bernice?

Nothing.

She stared at the yellow curtains, the gold trim on the handles of the dressing table.

Still nothing.

Bernice suddenly wanted to be with someone. Someone who could reassure her that she was still human.

Later. Evening.

It could almost be a normal evening.

It could almost be a civilized evening.

Bernice sat in the bar with Donimo, trying to feel good about herself and largely failing.

There was one thing, one good thing. She felt as if she had achieved something in persuading the Khulayn to let Vilbian commune with Maeve's mind. Now, the truth could come out. Whether it matched Arvaile's version of events remained to be seen.

One good thing. It wasn't enough.

'More whisky?' asked Donimo.

Bernice nodded, and watched as Donimo poured a generous amount of whisky into a metal tumbler.

Bernice picked up the tumbler and took a sip. She rubbed her polyplaster dressing. 'You know, I think the pain has almost gone now.' She flexed her thigh muscle experimentally. 'I'm going to try to walk.'

'Are you sure that's a good idea?'

Bernice blinked at him. 'It's the best idea I've had all day.'

Donimo smiled. 'You mean since you had the same idea this morning and fell over?'

'I won't fall over this time,' she said, with a confidence she didn't feel.

Their eyes met. Donimo was still smiling. His smile was a tad mocking, but mostly reassuring. Bernice realized, with a sudden pleasant shock, that he actually liked her. Wanted to be with her. Might still fancy seeing her after this cruise was over.

This was new. This was something that hadn't happened in a while. She wondered if it was an illusion, brought on by the strain of recent events. People being brought together; a side effect of tragedy.

'Let me help you up then.' He came to stand in front of her and she reached her arms up. He grabbed her under the shoulders and lifted her. They stood close, as if in the middle of a slow dance, and then he stepped back, still holding on to her upper arms.

Her leg felt wobbly, and slightly weak, but she was standing.

'Hey!' she said. 'This feels... weird.'

Donimo let go of her arms, and beckoned to her. 'Take a few steps, towards me.'

Bernice took one faltering step. Then another.

It hurt a bit, and she had to limp, but she was walking. Well, stumbling. She felt a surge of elation. 'Bloody hell! I'm ambulatory!'

Then: 'Ow!' A pain shot up her left thigh, but it wasn't bad enough to stop her walking.

'Hey, Don! I can walk!'

He clapped, the sound echoing off the glass-topped tables and mirrors.

Bernice did a little dance.

And then she fell over.

Mirrium arrived at Vilbian's cabin door and listened for a moment.

Silence. The silence of communion?

He hesitated. It was wrong to break into a communion. The guest mind could be damaged. Holy Instruction - But there was going to be no Holy Instruction. No birth. What Vilbian was doing wasn't part of any natural process, it was an abomination, a transgression of every law. And the Khulayn had allowed it. Had told Vilbian he could go ahead.

Mirrium tried not to think about that.

He raised his hand to the plain wood of the door, then knocked quietly.

A faint scrabbling sound within. The whine of alien machinery.

Mirrium knocked again. At last, the door opened, revealing Vilbian, his eyes dull with exhaustion. He had changed into a clean blue robe, but otherwise didn't seem to have cleaned himself: Mirrium could still smell the dead child.

He realized that he had no idea what to say.

Then he realized that Vilbian was holding the small, silvery tube of an alien weapon.

An alien weapon that was pointing at his face.

He backed away, more surprised than anything else.

'I thought you were a bit brighter than the others,' observed Vilbian, lowering the weapon and stuffing it casually in a pocket of his robe. He stepped back from the door. 'You'd better come in.'

Mirrium hesitated, then stepped across the threshold. He still couldn't quite believe the weapon. Obviously things with Vilbian were much worse than anyone could have imagined. To use violence -

Violence was something that not even the Renaissants used.

There was further heresy inside the cabin. Vilbian's piece of rock from the Holy Mountain of Saraan was full of twinkling alien machinery, where it should only have contained incense and potages. Something was fixed on to the lid, something which flashed a green alien light.

Vilbian saw Mirrium looking at the rock, and said, 'Don't worry about it. You don't need to know.'

Mirrium knew then what he had to say. 'Pilgrim Vilbian, you are a heretic and a sinner.' Mirrium could hear the air hissing through his gills. He hadn't realized how angry he was until now. 'You have broken every rule of our faith. You are working with aliens, using their machines and their weapons. You are threatening me with violence.'

'Not you,' said Vilbian. His words seemed oddly slurred, and his head weaved from side to side. 'But I'm in a difficult situation at the moment. I didn't know who you were. I may have to disappear again.'

'Why?'

Vilbian shook his head slowly. 'You're a long, long way from Saraanis, Pilgrim Mirrium,' he said. 'I suggest you don't ask too many questions.'

Mirrium thought about this for a moment, and then realized that Vilbian was right. It wasn't his place to know why Vilbian was behaving so strangely, only to stop him.

'Whatever your other heresies,' he said, 'I urge you to give up this idea of communing with an alien mind. You may have used it to bargain your way out of excommunication, but I shall never regard you as a true follower of our faith again. And I know that others will feel the same. So there is no point in going through with it.'

'I am a true follower,' fluted Vilbian, his voice low. 'More than you could possibly imagine. Mirrium. And I've already completed the communion.'

Again, Mirrium found himself lost for words. A burning religious fury fought with a desire to simply ask Vilbian what the alien mind was like. They stood for a full half-minute, facing each other in the cramped, angular space of the human cabin.

It was Vilbian who spoke first. 'Please go now. If I'm not here in the morning -' He broke off.

Mirrium felt a shudder of fear, as he realized that Vilbian was - despite all his cautions - about to draw him into his schemes.

'I don't think I should -'

But Vilbian gripped his shoulder with a long, clawed hand. 'Tell Professor Bernice Summerfield to look in B Hold.'

Before Mirrium could speak, before he could even think, Vilbian was bundling him out of the cabin, pushing him through the door, closing it in his face.

'If I'm not here in the morning -' Did Vilbian mean that he was in danger? That he might die? Was that why he'd threatened Mirrium with the human weapon?

Mirrium knocked on the door again. And again. And again. He called Vilbian's name.

There was no reply.



## RAGE AGAINST THE MACHINE

*The girl stood on the burning deck...*

A small square, on the port side of the ship, tucked away in a fold of the seamless superstructure. The glare of the morning sun beating down upon the white tiles. A gathering of people - not many, less than ten - standing around the square. Flowers, procured from the greenhouse, lying around the edge of the square.

Bernice stood next to Donimo, clutching his arm. She still felt a bit unsteady on her feet.

Arvaile was on the opposite side of the square. His eyes met Bernice's just once, and then he looked down at the white tiles, as if afraid Bernice would be able to see within him, to the truth. Bernice wished she could.

Next to Arvaile stood Professor Smith, in black as usual. Then Professor Ingerskjold, blonde hair lifting gently in the slight breeze, dabbing her eyes with a lace hankie. Professor Southernay, his usually cheerful face made strange by an expression of ashen sorrow.

Bernice had learnt that morning that Maeve had once been a student in one of his seminar groups.

The captain was reading a passage from the Bible. The sonorous words meant nothing to Bernice. And less to Maeve, who could never hear them. Never hear anything now.

What good was faith, against death? Against murder? There was no religion in the world which could protect you from whatever had happened to Maeve. They'd all wanted this memorial service, reflected Bernice, but what sort of ceremony was this to mark the passing of such a bright, full life?

The captain finished his address by reading the Lord's Prayer.

For the slightest of moments, Bernice was overwhelmed with a sense of Maeve's presence. She could almost smell her coffee-like perfume, almost hear the clack and jangle of her bangles mingling with her laughter, almost see her big brown eyes gleaming. The sensation was physical, as though she'd fallen into a bath of Maeve. And then it was gone, as quickly as it had arrived, and Bernice was left staring out to sea, the hot sun drying the tears on her face.

She'd only known Maeve for a short while, and had been looking forward to getting to know her more. Looking forward to a long, fruitful friendship. That made the hurt worse.

She turned her face to Donimo's shoulder and let the tears come, the sobs rack her body. He murmured wordless sounds of comfort.

He had been right. Delayed reaction. Now Bernice felt the loss of her friend as keenly as the wound on her leg.

She heard people walking away, someone sobbing, the captain murmuring words of comfort. The sounds receded until Bernice knew that she and Donimo were the only ones left.

Bernice looked up, blinking.

'Are you -?'

'All right? No,' sniffed Bernice. 'But I'm feeling better now. '

Vilbian sat on his bed, staring around at his cabin. Superficially, it all looked the same. The drapes, the bed, the square placard on the wall, the large white chest containing his alcoholic beverages.

But after communion with the human's mind, everything also looked different in a way he couldn't immediately explain. It was as though the communion had instilled in his mind a human's knowledge of the things in his room.

The drapes, he now knew, were made of *Sylan weave*. The bed wasn't a bed but something called a *futon*.. The square placard was a *painting*, of the Sultan of Tashwari, the founder

of St Oscar's University. And alcoholic beverages were more commonly called *drink* - or, on a seafaring vessel, *grog*.

Vilbian shook his head. He didn't want all this knowledge! Saraani names for things were perfectly all right.

The communion had been strange in other ways, too. His previous communion had been with a particularly placid Saraani mind, and had lasted several days. It had been peaceful, solemn, like a plaintive song in the corner of his mind.

Maeve's alien mind had been a blundering, chaotic cacophony of sounds and images, careering about his head like a blind sandwing. It had taken all his concentration to focus upon it — and when he had, all he found were the last moments of the woman's life.

He was still trying to take in the implications of what he'd seen in the communion. But his duty was clear.

Vilbian reached under his bed and dragged out the rock from the Holy Mountain of Saraan. With a sigh, he unlocked it and took out a couple of cylindrical objects, concealing them within a pouch in his tunic. He vowed he would only use them if absolutely necessary.

He set off along the strange, angled, human corridors, with their shiny plastic and paintings, down stairways, down to where the metal of the ship was bare and the big square heads of rivets were visible. The air was colder here.

At last he came to B Hold.

It was sealed by a complex electronic lock. You would have to know the exact code to be able to open it.

Or have access to espionage technology.

Vilbian licked his mandibles. He reached into his tunic pocket and took out a small pill-sized stud. He peeled off an adhesive backing strip, and fixed the stud to the side of the lock. There was a barely audible hum, a beep and a thunk, and then the door slid open with a tight hiss of hydraulics.

Vilbian shrank back from the blast of icy air which streamed forth from the hold. Chill fingers of it curled themselves round his arms and legs and into his bones, and when he breathed it fell as though slivers of ice were coursing through his respiratory passages. He waited until the blast of

air had calmed a little, and squinted into the hold. It was pitch dark. Wraiths of white mist hung in the air.

Doubt entered his mind and Vilbian hesitated on the threshold. The communion had been such a disorientating experience that the information gained from it could be incorrect or at least misleading. Vilbian pulled his cloak more tightly around himself and stepped inside. Ice crystals crunched underfoot. It was very cold. His head swam with the warming image of an orangestone temple at sunrise, its blue glass spire sending beams of azure light across the plain.

He felt along the wall for the illumination control. He found a metal switch and flicked it on. Suddenly, the entire hold was bathed in harsh light. It was so bright that Vilbian closed his eyes for a moment. And when he opened them, he hooted low and long.

It was exactly as it had been in the communion.

There before him was a double row of plastic containers, stretching the whole length of the hold. He turned round, and an identical sight greeted his eyes. Their contents were plain to see; the 'godless things' Maeve had so feared. He thought of the human woman, so small, so delicate-looking, yet so strong. Her strange, chirpy voice. He almost turned and walked from the hold right there and then, but then he remembered his mission.

He'd stopped shivering. Perhaps that was a bad sign.

He'd better be quick.

Steeling himself. Vilbian walked towards the rows of godless things.

Maeve woke from the strangest dream ever to blossom in her mind.

In the dream, she had been floating naked in a thick, inky sea, her bare feet pedalling against the treacly fluid, which lapped against her chin as she tried to keep her head above the surface. A surging, whooshing sound surrounded her.

Like the movement of blood in a giant artery. This was underpinned by a faint, distant, regular boom, like a heartbeat. The sound somehow made her feel sad, so she tried not to listen to

it. Above her, the sky was wheeling with stars. Oh, wait - these stars weren't still, sharp points of light like normal stars. They were crawling about the black sky as though they were alive - darting, zooming comets, pale restless fireflies, oscillating nodules and fizzing fireworks. Their golden light reflected on the viscous surface of the undulating ocean. The sight was beautiful and sinister, frightening one moment and soothing the next.

As Maeve had floated there, treading water, other lights became visible. She could see, in the distance on the horizon, large domes of soft buttery yellow luminescence, their haze spreading like haloes around them. They reminded Maeve of headlights through a fog, or the harbour lights in Aberdeen she remembered from her childhood visit to her great-grandparents' birthplace. She allowed herself to drift towards these lights, lulled by their welcoming glow.

As she neared them, the sea beneath her seemed to dissolve, sliming away from her body like a horde of slugs, and the stars above had been consumed in the greater glow. Pretty soon, she had been completely consumed in the soft light, which had burnt brighter, brighter, phasing through fire yellow to nuclear white, growing brighter, brighter, until she thought her head would burst -

- and then she'd woken up.

And all she could see now were the usual shifting purple-black blobs that you see when your eyes are closed. The muscles of her face felt tight, as if she'd just had a wash with cheap soap. Maeve tried to open her eyes, but she couldn't. She couldn't move any part of herself.

Was this still a dream? Was this that awful sleep paralysis thing you sometimes get when your mind wakes up before your body does?

Maeve tried to think back to before the dream, but found that she couldn't. She couldn't recall anything. Couldn't remember going to bed, couldn't remember anything about the preceding day. She began to get a tingling feeling of expectation, verging on excitement, that soon all would be revealed, and she'd be laughing at the banality of it all. It was

highly likely that she'd been drinking with Bernice, and this was just the beginning of a spectacularly fearsome hangover.

Then, totally against her will, her eyelids snapped open, and her world turned from shifting purple to fuzzy white.

She gasped - she could move her mouth, but her jaw felt weird, as though she'd clicked it out of joint. Had somebody punched her? Had she - the first glimmerings of panic - had she been in an accident? Was she dead? Was this the afterlife? Was this white fuzziness the cotton-wool softness of heaven? If so, she was disappointed. Yeah, so heaven's white and fuzzy. What a bore. Perhaps this was limbo.

As her mind tried to focus on her surroundings, she realized that she wasn't lying down in her bed, as she'd thought, but standing up, against a wall or something.

No. Not standing. Not in the normal way.

At the edges of her vision, she could see restraints holding her body. She was tied down, strapped like a sacrifice. She struggled to pull at the restraints, just to move her eyes so that she could see them more clearly, but her body wouldn't respond.

This was no party-aftermath. This was a bad accident. Maybe she'd had a stroke. Jesus Christ, she was only thirty-three. She struggled to move again, without effect. Her arms and legs felt as though they were a long way off.

Where was she?

And then the memories of what had happened slammed home with almost physical force. The pilgrimage. Brion. The attack on the beach. Benny in the sick-bay bed, pale and irritable. Following Brion down to the hold. The rows and rows of godless things in their plastic coffins. One of them stepping down out of its restraints, reaching out for her - its hands around her throat - choking the life out of her -

— and then?

Her vision was clearing now, the objects on the opposite wall revealing themselves to be plastic coffins, their smooth surfaces reflecting strong light from above.

Plastic coffins, containing the godless things.

Mother Marunia, she was still in the hold where she'd been attacked.

She clenched her eyes tight shut, and said a prayer she hadn't said since she was a child, afraid of the dark and the imaginary horrors under her bed. She was breathing heavily, but her chest didn't seem to be rising and falling. Christ, she must be so badly injured. They'd put her in some sort of machine to keep her alive. *They?* No, Brion must have done it. He would have tried to help her, whatever was going on. She looked around, but he was nowhere to be seen. She called his name, but her vocal chords weren't working. After a tremendous struggle she succeeded in opening her mouth, but all she could produce was a horrifying, autistic gurgling sound.

And then, she managed to speak. 'Bri - on.'

But it wasn't her voice. It was a thick, sluggish drawl. The voice of illness or insanity.

She spoke again, hardly believing it was her own voice. 'Where - am - I?'

'Don't try to speak,' came a voice somewhere off to her left. A calm, fluting, sing-song voice; the sort of voice you'd imagine an angel to have.

But she knew that this place was not heaven. More like hell. A personalized hell.

She squinted and turned her head. An angular, horned shape came into view. It took her a while to remember what it was.

A Saraani.

It moved to stand in front of her, saying calming words, but Maeve wasn't listening: she was trying to work out what was strange about it. And then she got it. Its head was on a level with hers. Why? The Saraani were so tall. She usually had to look up at them, their spined heads bowing to look down at her.

'Do not be afraid,' said the Saraani. 'I am going to do something to you in a moment, but it will not hurt.'

Its calm words chilled her. This was worse than a nightmare. Was she still dreaming? What was the Saraani doing?

It reached out a clawed hand to touch something by the side of her head. Maeve heard a click, and her whole body convulsed.

Suddenly, she could feel her body. It felt huge, its extremities distant, as though her mind had shrunk within her head. Not like her body at all. All the reactions were wrong. Surely her heart should be hammering with fear, but she could only feel a huge, steady beat, more like an artificial pump than a human heart.

She thrust out a hand in front of her, expecting to see her dark skin and small hands, wrist bedecked with bracelets, but Instead she saw a thick, muscled arm of matt black, inset with grooves and crevices and tendons, and at end of it, a huge gloved hand.

*The thing on the beach reached out to Bernice and a metal spike shot out of its knuckle -*

Maeve refused to believe what she was seeing. She tried to walk, to move, but she was still being held back. The only thing she could move was her arm so she thrashed it from side to side, bashing it, trying to smash it open. Surely her own arm was inside?

The Saraani was talking to her now.

‘Don’t try to struggle.’

Let me speak! thought Maeve. I helped you, I gave you sanctuary on this world, why are you doing this to me? Why-

The Saraani reached out once more, his clawed hands unfastening the straps around her - her? - body. Yet when they came loose, she still couldn’t move. The Saraani beckoned to her, a slim, silvery object in his hand. Maeve felt herself move, step down to the floor and follow the Saraani across the hold, a mere passenger. She had no idea what was going on, no idea what this Saraani was doing or what connection it could have with Brion.

They came to the horseshoe-shaped dais, where she’d argued with Brion earlier that day. Regret clamped down. Oh, if only she hadn’t come here! If only she’d just asked him what was going on!

As she thought that, the body stopped. Just for an instant. Then it resumed its relentless march, its feet clumping on the metal floor.



Maeve felt the first glimmerings of hope. Perhaps she could control this thing. Perhaps. Perhaps she could get her body out of it somehow, go back to her life, go on the razz with Bernice again, breathe the sea air...

She would have cried at the memories, memories of a real life in a real body, but the eyes remained dry, watching the Saraani.

He was lifting a panel from the metal surface of the control console. He tweaked some wires within, linked them to his device, gave a nod of satisfaction.

'Relay hexadecimal wetware dump to vocal output,' he said conversationally.

To her horror, Maeve knew exactly what he was talking about. And she began to speak, rapidly, with perfect enunciation.

'a6 at 24, ab at 56,47, 90,45. b5 at 23, 24, 98...'

Her voice went on for minutes, tireless. Her throat didn't even get dry.

The Saraani listened, and a red light on the device winked slowly.

'...bb. 12 at 65, 66, 67. 9a...'

This was hell. Yes. God must have decided to punish her after all for her rebellion against the faith. Because - although she didn't know how - she knew what these numbers were: they were the description of her programming parameters, in standard hexadecimal code for an RIS-14 wetware-link processor.

A processor that was inside her, controlling most of the functions of her body. Shutting down and waking up her mind on command.

She wasn't just dead. She was worse than dead. She had become the slave of a machine.

## EVERYBODY'S GOT TO LEARN SOMETIME

Bernice sat in her cabin, on the edge of the bed. She'd done all the obvious things: she'd cried and hugged a pillow, had a glass of Chateau Yquatine. cried some more, cursed the universe, cried some more, and finally curled up and stared at the wall for about an hour.

Now she was feeling remarkably clear-headed. It was as though her grief for Maeve had flushed her emotional system out, so to speak. Cleared the decks. She felt sharp, focused, angry. She wanted to get the bastard or bastards responsible for Maeve's death.

That meant another little chat with Arvaile (hang his feelings), and then check up on Vilbian to see how he was doing.

Galvanized by her new-found sense of purpose, Bernice leapt up and pulled off her black dress, lobbing it with deadly accuracy onto the vast and whiffy pile of dirty clothes in the corner. In its stead she donned a green dress with large buttons, and big sturdy boots that didn't go with it at all but would probably come in handy if she needed to kick anything.

She was struggling with the laces on the boots when there was a knock on the door.

'Come in,' she said, looking up. The door opened hesitantly, to reveal the tall, cloaked, spiny-headed form of a Saraani.

'Are you the human known as Professor Bernice Summerfield?'

'I'm Benny, yes.'

A pause. It lengthened to a considerable silence, which Bernice felt it necessary to break.

'Well, come in.'

The Saraani bowed, walked into the room and closed the door behind it. It then just stood there, its gills making an irritating humming noise. This one had a green tint to its skin and its horns and spines were white. So it wasn't Vilbian or the Khulayn. This was a Saraani she had never met before.

'I don't believe I've had the pleasure...?' began Bernice.

The Saraani cocked its head to one side. 'What pleasure would you like to have? You could join us in worship...'

Bernice coughed. 'I mean, what is your name?'

'I am Mirrium. I have a message from Vilbian.'

This was beginning to sound awfully familiar. 'Not "Meet me by the carousel - I need to talk"?''

'No. Vilbian told me that if he was not in his cabin this morning, I was to tell you to look in B Hold. And he is nowhere to be found this morning.'

'B Hold? Why?'

Mirrium Saraani hesitated, then said, 'He said it was dangerous to ask any questions. But he was not at worship this morning, so I am doing what he asked me to do.'

'Why? Are you a friend of his?'

Again a long hesitation. 'No. I think Vilbian is a heretic. He is working with aliens. But -' Mirrium's tongue flicked in and out - 'he entrusted me with this message. He said he was still a follower of our faith. I have done his bidding.'

The Saraani turned to leave.

Bernice caught his arm, almost falling over her still-untied bootlaces in the effort. 'Wait! Do you know if he had finished the communion with Maeve's mind?'

'He said he had.'

Bernice hesitated. 'Does that mean she's dead now? Really dead?'

The big alien head swung around, the green eyes met hers.

'Your friend is one with the GodUniverse,' he said quietly. 'Now, please let me go.'

Bernice nodded, let him go, let him close the door. She closed her eyes for a moment, then knelt down and finished tying her laces.

Then she stood up.

‘Right,’ she said aloud. ‘B Hold, here I come!’

After a moment’s thought, she decided that it might be a good idea to ask Donimo and the captain to give her a hand this time.

As soon as Mirrium walked back into the greenhouse, he knew there was something seriously wrong. It was time for worship, and he expected to find his fellow pilgrims lining the boulevard, waiting for the Khulayn to lead them out onto the sun deck.

Instead, as the door slid back, he was confronted with a scene of panic and confusion. The first thing that struck him was the noise; a dreadful wailing, like the sound of wounded beasts. But there were no beasts in the greenhouse, only his fellow Saraani.

He stepped inside, legs feeling unsteady as he walked along the boulevard.

There were Saraani lying on the grass, on the sand, hooting in grief and pain. Some were running around, blundering into trees. Mirrium grabbed the sleeve of the nearest. ‘Pilgrim Loreyn, what is happening?’ But Loreyn shook free and staggered away.

In near-panic himself, Mirrium stumbled into a copse of yellow-leaved rubbery trees, and all but tripped over a Saraani who crouched there on the burnt blue soil. It was Thlyveer, who had performed Holy Transference for his first time the day before exile. Perhaps the last of their order ever to do so on Saraanis.

Mirrium crouched down beside his fellow pilgrim, gently touching his arm. ‘What’s happening?’

Thlyveer shook his head from side to side, staring at a line of beetles which were marching across the soil in front of him.

‘Thlyveer, what is wrong?’

Thlyveer looked up at him, his green eyes half closed with tears. ‘My child is no more,’ he whispered. ‘The mind within, too. And the same has happened to the others.’

Mirrium felt a lurch of panic, a sharp, visceral contraction, as if he were prematurely giving birth. He struggled to

control the feeling, to control his body. Struggled to think. What could have caused this? Yijioll, the mind within his, still dreamed, and his egg was growing slowly but surely. They were the only certain things left in his life. He would feel devastated, broken, if something somehow took them away.

And now they were threatened. If this had happened to the others, then it could happen to him. He felt another surge of panic, made himself sit down next to Thlyveer. There were no words he could say which could change what had happened and restore Thlyveer's child.

Perhaps, thought Mirrium, Holy Transference and Instruction were only possible on Saraanis, as had been feared by certain members of the now-disbanded Council of Khulayns. Perhaps the spirit of their home planet helped the process. They were never meant to leave Saraanis, but they had, and now none of them would ever give birth again. They'd all die on this watery world, their lifetimes wasted and no temples behind to remember them. He cursed Dellah with its glittering seas. Cursed the Renaissants for making them come here.

Suddenly there came a hooting from outside the copse. A distinctive, commanding sound, which was not one of grief but of anger.

'It's the Khulayn,' said Mirrium. 'He might know what has caused this. Are you coming?'

Thlyveer did not answer him directly; he just kept muttering the indistinct lines of an ancient prayer over and over again.

Mirrium left Thlyveer in the copse, and walked over to where the Khulayn stood. Saraani were sitting on the grass around him in various attitudes of grief.

He spied Zyquill standing near by, stock still, obviously in shock. Mirrium knew that Zyquill - along with the Khulayn mid Vilbian - had commenced the pilgrimage not with child, mid therefore able to perform Holy Transference; the notion being that if any Saraani should die of an accident or an alien disease, there would be someone able to perform Holy Transference on them.

Mirrium remembered thinking at the time that this had been an unnecessary precaution. It didn't seem so any longer.

He was now near enough to hear what the Khulayn was saying.

'Many of us have reported the deaths of the newborns within, and the minds within. I have found traces of a sterilizing poison - the very same poison we use on Renaissants - within the water supply. The only reason I can imagine for this is that we have a Renaissance infiltrator on board who wishes to prevent us from founding a viable colony.'

Mirrium sat down on the grass, whilst those around him wailed in pain and loss.

His egg still lived.

Yijioll's mind was still within his.

Why was he, Mirrium, unaffected, whilst all around him grieved?

Had the GodUniverse spared him? Why?

We must find this Renaissance traitor. Find him and sterilize him,' hooted the Khulayn.

Suddenly, Mirrium remembered. Vilbian had performed Holy Transference on an alien. And then he'd willingly communed with the mind.

*He was the Renaissance traitor!*

He felt Zyquill's gaze upon him, and looked up.

'I know who the Renaissance traitor is,' whispered Mirrium.

Zyquill staggered, and his tongue lolled right out of his mouth.

'What's wrong, Zyquill? I tell you, I know who the traitor is! It is Vilbian!'

Other Saraani, including the Khulayn, had turned to look at them. Mirrium instantly felt self-conscious.

'Pilgrim Mirrium,' said the Khulayn. 'Do you have something to tell us?'

'Yes, Khulayn,' stuttered Mirrium, arranging his thoughts. 'Surely the traitor who has poisoned our water must be the heretic Vilbian, who performed Holy Transference on an alien?'

Hoots and murmurs of approval from the other Saraani.

The Khulayn nodded slowly. 'This is possible,' he said.

'This morning, Vilbian is not in his cabin,' said Mirrium. 'Nor is he anywhere in the greenhouse. This proves that he is the Renaissant traitor who has sterilized us - or most of -' Mirrium tailed away.

'What is it, Mirrium?' asked the Khulayn.

'My egg is still with me. And Yijioll.'

There were gasps of envy from the others.

'I suggest you return to your cabin,' said the Khulayn, 'and commune with Yijioll. Zhylvavian save us, you could be the future of this settlement.'

Mirrium hurried away. He didn't want to be special like this. He wanted to suffer like the others.

But it looked as though he had no choice in the matter. Yijioll and he were the future now.

All the future they had left.

Donimo punched in the door code, and the door to B Hold slid open. Cold air streamed out, a welcome contrast to the scorching sunlight of the open deck.

Inside, it was totally dark.

'Let me enter first,' said the captain.

'Shh!' said Bernice. She was sure she'd heard a sound inside the hold whilst the captain had been talking. She switched on her torch. The beam revealed a metal floor, clouds of chilly air and glints of something that looked like glass along the walls.

The captain went to step in before her, but she grabbed his shoulder. 'Ladies first,' she said sweetly.

Bernice stepped inside the hold, flashing her beam about. Suddenly, the whole area was flooded with light.

She closed her eyes, then opened them to see Donimo standing sheepishly beside a big chunky light switch.

'Great!' she said. 'Now anyone who happens to be around knows She broke off as she realized what the light had revealed: rows and rows of plastic containers, like coffins, upright along each of the longest walls.

And inside the plastic coffins -

Bernice gasped. Tall, humanoid figures, all with chiselled, androgynous faces and black hair. Exactly the same as the thing which had attacked her on the beach. There must be a couple of hundred of them.

Bernice turned to the captain. 'You said you had searched the ship. How come you didn't come across this little lot?'

'The Khulayn told me that this hold was full of Saraani artefacts. He swore me to secrecy. I had no reason to search this part of the ship.'

'Didn't you notice them being loaded aboard?'

'There were quite a few sealed crates,' said the captain. 'They arrived in a shuttle a few days before we set off. They were marked as Saraani artefacts and I had no business looking into them. '

Oh, bloody hell. 'You're the captain! You should have insisted!'

The captain turned to her. 'And risked losing the *Lady of Lorelei*? The Khulayn would have cancelled the pilgrimage if I had raised even the slightest objection!' he shouted.

Bernice instantly felt sorry for him again. Poor old sod. It's so easy to deceive the dreamers.

He turned away, his jaw working. Donimo went to console him.

It was beginning to look as if any number of the Saraani, up to and including the Khulayn, could be involved in this. There was no time for speculation, though - her first priority was to find out exactly what was happening. The accusations could come later.

'Right,' said Bernice. 'What we seem to have is a hold full of what look like military bioconstructs, quite capable of offing half the population of Dellah.' She gestured to the rows of bioconstructs. 'What I want to know is, what the frolicking foxes are they doing on board a ship in the middle of a religious pilgrimage?'

'Unless it isn't a religious pilgrimage,' said Donimo. He walked over to the horseshoe-shaped console in the middle of the hold.

Bernice felt slightly queasy. She had no problems with androids and artificial intelligences, but military biocon-



structs gave her the creeps. They were stuffed to the gills with wetware and toting enough weaponry to reduce a city to rubble. They could walk, bark commands and kill, but they could never cuddle a child, give you lovebites or show you magic tricks. Bernice grimaced. Manufactured life (if it could be called life) on this scale seemed obscene. No wonder Maeve's faith rejected science when it kept getting abused like this.

Oh God. Arvaile. He must have known about this lot. Which meant -

She turned round to the captain. We need to get Arvaile down here,' she said. We need to confront him with this.'

'Steady on,' said Donimo. We don't know what -'

Then the sound was repeated. The sound that Bernice had heard earlier. But now she could hear it more clearly: a short, almost reptilian, hiss.

No, *a breath*.. Someone was breathing.

Bernice turned her head, trying to locate the source of the sound.

And then she saw, at the far end of the hold, one of the bioconstructs, out of its plastic case. It was standing on a raised dais against a metal trellis.

Bernice pointed. 'Look over there.'

They walked up to it.

Bernice peered at its fearsome-looking armour-plated boots. What was that in the plating? Some sort of dust? She bent down and ran her finger along the gap.

Sand.

White sand, from the beach.

'It's the one that attacked me. It probably killed Maeve, too,' whispered Bernice.

'Must be a test subject or something,' said Donimo.

'Arvaile said he'd destroyed it,' put in the captain.

'Arvaile, in case you hadn't noticed, has been lying through his teeth.'

Hissss-ss.

It wasn't coming from the bioconstruct, it was coming from behind them.

*Click. Swish*..

Bernice turned, saw the blue-cloaked figure of a Saraani emerge from behind the row of bioconstructs, and head for the exit.

‘Stop!’ she snapped.

The figure froze, and at that moment she recognized it. The tip of its front right horn was missing.

It was Vilbian.

‘You’re all in danger,’ he said. ‘I suggest we discuss the situation elsewhere.’ He started to move towards the door.

The captain pulled a gun. Old-fashioned, heavy, like the man, but still a gun and undoubtedly lethal.

Vilbian stopped, then dodged towards the doorway and ran.

The captain didn’t fire. Bernice hadn’t really expected him to. She ran after Vilbian. But when she stopped in the doorway to see which way he’d run along the corridor outside, she couldn’t see him at all.

*Weapons activity has been detected, Theo. Now’s your chance to do some more killing.*

I want to go on sleeping. I want to go on dying. Please let me die.

*You can’t use the spike. They took that away. But you still have your limbs, your big strong lethal limbs.*

Not mine not mine.

*So use them. Come on,, there are three targets in here. Three things for you to kill. So kill them!*

Bernice heard a shout from behind her, turned to see the bioconstruct moving, restraints snapping as if they were made of paper.

An arm shot out like a piston and took hold of Donimo’s head. Another arm caught the captain’s head. She saw the captain struggling to bring the gun to bear, heard a shot and a ricochet.

She ran towards them, looking for a weapon, for some way of helping. But before she’d covered half the distance across the ringing metal floor the bioconstruct had knocked the two men’s heads together with a sharp, sickening crack.

Both men fell soundlessly to the floor.

Bernice gasped. It was like a cartoon, like a joke, except that it was real and there were no stars or tweetie birds, just blood running down the captain's face, and the bioconstruct advancing across the room towards her, its eyes never leaving hers, its boots thumping heavily on the metal floor. Bernice concentrated on staying calm. She had to survive this. She had to, or Donimo and the captain would be the next to die.

She backed up against the console, thinking. Desperately thinking. She became aware that her injured leg was hurting, and worse, that it was shaking. It might give way any moment.

The bioconstruct stopped in front of her, its eyes focusing and unfocusing. Bernice panted, waiting for it to make a move.

But it didn't. It just stood there, its arms by its side, as if it were standing to attention.

And then, it spoke. 'Professor - Summerfield,' it mumbled, in a deep, clipped voice.

It knew her, as it had known her on the beach. 'Yes, that's me. Who are you?'

'Theo,' it said.

Theo.

The missing student. How could this be the same person? 'Theo?' she said again.

The bioconstruct's head jerked, as though its face had been slapped.

*There she is — Bernice. The one you love. The one you can't have. Right in front of you. So kill her. Now!*

I don't want to kill her.

*Yes, you do. Look at her! She turned you down. She'd never have you, she thinks you 're an insect.*

No. She's kind. She wants to help.

*Look at her eyes! Fear. Revulsion:. You 're an insect to her. So kill her as though she is an insect!*

Go away. Go away. Let me through.

*You're not strong enough to get through. But you are strong enough to crush her, pop her open.*

Let me through.

*Embrace her, crush her!*

No!

*You - can't break - can't break - through -*

I can!

*Kill kill kill -*

No!

The bioconstruct staggered forwards, its hands reaching out to Bernice. Its whole body was jerking.

It spoke, clearly and calmly. 'The voice in my head wants me to kill you.' The words sounded as if they were coming from far, far away. Probably from beneath layers and layers of military programming.

Fighting down a wave of anger and revulsion, Bernice stepped back from the bioconstruct. Now it was just standing there, its blank face shining in the light, its glassy black eyes following her every movement.

'Theo,' said Bernice. 'You've got to tell me how you ended up like this. Who did this to you? I want to help you.'

*She wants to help you! Pathetic.*

I want her to help - someone help -

*Enough of this shit. Kill her. Kill kill kill.*

No.

*I don't care how. Get rid of her! Bernice must be destroyed!*

*No - please - don't make me -*

*Destroy her!*

No!

*Destroy!*

The gloved fist missed Bernice's face by inches.

'Oh shit, not again,' she cried as she staggered backwards, slipping on the cold floor.

Her back slammed into the edge of the metal console, pain slicing down her leg. She twisted awkwardly, trying to force the pain out of her body, trying to *concentrate*, because that was the only way she was going to stay alive.

The bioconstruct grabbed her by the shoulders. Its grip was vicelike, and Bernice grimaced as she felt her bones grind together.

Then its hands moved to her neck.

It was going to strangle her, as it had strangled Maeve.

Its face blank, it lifted her bodily from the floor.

Bernice bit her tongue, the steel taste of blood flooding her mouth. She let out a gurgling scream, and kicked as hard as she could with her good leg.

No use. It was like kicking a wall.

Then, the bioconstruct gave an abrupt shout, its head twisted to one side and Bernice was flung to the floor.

She landed on her front, palms flat against the cold metal. She rubbed her throat, the coldness seeming to numb the pain.

She could hear the bioconstruct making guttural sounds, as if it were trying to speak.

She scrambled onto her back, looking up at her attacker.

The bioconstruct stood above her, its face expressionless once more, twitching occasionally as though pulled by invisible wires.

Bernice scabbled for purchase on the cold floor.

All at once, the bioconstruct straightened up and lifted its leg.

Bernice gasped as she felt a heavy object pressing on her chest.

She looked down.

Its foot was on her ribcage. Shit, he was only *resting* his left foot on her, leaning back on his right. All he had to do was shift his centre of gravity and she'd be crushed like an insect. Her ribcage would shatter and her internal organs would burst.

'Theo,' shouted Bernice. 'Listen to me. You don't want to do this. You don't want to -' she gasped as his foot pressed down - God, she could feel her ribcage bending '- kill me.'

Both its hands were clutching its head, its face twisting and jerking, gaping mouth dribbling strings of saliva onto its breastplate.

‘Donimo,’ she croaked, twisting round, but he was unconscious. Or dead. One blow to the head is all it can take to kill. She couldn’t see the captain, but there was no sign of movement.

The pressure increased a bit more.

How much more could her bones take until they snapped?

She felt the pressure increase even more and closed her eyes tight.

This is going to hurt and it’s not going to be quick. I’m going to be lying here, popped open like a slug, my heart pumping blood into empty space, my guts steaming and I’ll be screaming but no one will hear.

The heel of the foot came down into her abdomen, forcing the air out of her in a screaming moan. The blood was pounding in her ears and her arms scrabbled around the icy door for something, anything, to use as a weapon.

But there was nothing.

This is it, Summerfield. Trodden to death.

Then suddenly, there was a very loud bang above her, and the pressure immediately vanished.

She opened her eyes, gasping, looking at the ceiling criss-crossed with girders, her hands moving straight to her ribcage, feeling gently for damage. Thank God, she was OK. She was OK. Another second, and she’d have been crushed.

Bernice panted in shock, as sandalled feet walked past her, long claws clicking on the metal floor. A hand - a Saraani hand - appeared at the edge of her vision, holding a slim metallic tube.

There was a flash of light from its end.

Bernice heard the heavy tread of the bioconstruct, and realized that it wasn’t stopping. Whatever the Saraani had done hadn’t killed it.

Another flash of light, much brighter this time.

She struggled upright.

The gun. The captain’s gun. It had to be somewhere.

Bernice scrambled over to Donimo, ignoring the pain in her leg. He was still breathing, still alive. Thank God.

But she couldn’t see the gun anywhere.

Weapons discharge.

There had been a weapons discharge in the immediate vicinity. Type: UV laser, 3-harmonic, pulse firing at 3.5 kilocycles.

Maeve began moving before she even remembered who she was. When she did remember, her body didn't stop moving. It jogged across the floor of the hold. Something stirred on her arm, a narrow snakelike tube protruding from her wrist.

Something called a *flenser* was armed.

No! she shrieked - but the shriek went nowhere.

Then she saw it in front of her.

The godless thing.

The thing that had killed her.

She recognized the black, shiny, muscled arms, the slack-jawed face.

This was the thing that had killed her *killed her killed her* and the target was acquired, weapon charging -

Weapon charging. But did she want to kill?

She had no choice.

Something was making her kill.

Weapon discharging.

There was a fizzing noise and the bioconstruct was blasted into nothingness.

And then -

she was running, running —

host mind seizure protect nurture hide check wetware  
alignment hide recuperate hide hide hide -

Vilbian was staring at the place the bioconstruct had been, as if he couldn't quite believe what had happened.

Bernice couldn't either. The bioconstruct seemed to have been molecularly dispersed. She craned round to see what had done this to it - and saw a *second* bioconstruct, staggering out of the hold.

Bernice stood up, slowly and painfully, keeping her eyes on Vilbian. What was he doing wandering around with a hand-held laser? No time to worry about that now. She could still hear the receding footsteps of the second bioconstruct. It was

beginning to look as if the entire hold full of the things might come to life at any moment. And even if all they did was fire at each other, Bernice didn't fancy her chances of survival.

'Can you help me get Donimo and the captain out of here before any more of these things wake up?' she asked.

Vilbian raised his gun until it was pointing directly at her.

Was he going to shoot her? It didn't seem like it. He looked distracted, as though he'd forgotten he was toting a lethal weapon.

Bernice circled warily around him, talking all the while, trying to put the console between them. 'So what do you know about all this? What are you doing down here? Why did you try to kill the bioconstruct?'

'My mission must come first,' fluted Vilbian, interrupting Bernice's flow of words. It was as if he were saying it to himself.

She could hear footsteps, echoing down the corridor outside, but she had her back to the door and didn't dare take her eyes from Vilbian.

The footsteps clattered into the hold and a human voice rang out. 'Don't move!'

Bernice swung round. Arvaile stood framed in the doorway, a blaster in his hand. Behind him, the Khulayn.

Bernice couldn't say she was wildly surprised.

They advanced into the room, quickly, confidently. Vilbian swung his gun to cover them.

'Give the weapon to me,' said the Khulayn calmly, reaching out a claw. 'And we can talk about this.'

Vilbian was casting about, looking first at his leader, and then at Bernice.

She realized she was going to have to decide who to trust. Well, that was easy: none of them.

But she still didn't think Vilbian was a killer. She was less sure about Arvaile. Someone had to be responsible for this hold full of walking military obscenities. And he had the necessary qualifications.

'You lying bastard,' she said softly to Arvaile. 'You killed her, didn't you?'



He shook his head. 'I wish I could explain,' he muttered. 'I wish there was time -'

From the corner of her eye, Bernice saw that the captain had woken up.

Was getting up.

Was getting up with a gun in his hand.

The gun was pointed at Vilbian.

At the wrong target. It was hardly surprising. He must be confused - perhaps only half conscious. And he knew even less about what was going on than Bernice did.

Vilbian in turn was now pointing his gun waveringly at Arvaile, tongue flicking out rapidly. He didn't seem to have noticed the captain.

Oh, shit. Someone was going to get shot unless she did something. Now.

Bernice walked straight up to Vilbian, interposing herself between him and Arvaile, and said conversationally. 'It's OK, Vilbian, you can give me the gun if you like.' As she spoke, she curled her hands gently around the cylinder and took it out of his hands with surprising ease.

She stepped back, turning to Arvaile.

'Your turn, Brion. What we need here are explanations, not a shooting match. Whatever is going on, it can't be worth any more people's lives.'

For a second he just stared at her, blinking strangely as if trying not to cry.

Then he handed her the gun.

The captain gave a loud sigh of relief, and dropped his own gun to his side.

Bernice examined the weapon she'd taken from Vilbian. It was a high-intensity UV pulse laser, military issue. Bernice was almost certain it had been made on Earth. She was going to have to ask Vilbian some searching questions. But first things first - she had to deal with Arvaile.

She looked up again, straight into the barrel of the blaster the Khulayn was pointing at her.

It took her a moment to realize what it was. Black, bulbous, strangely tiny in the Khulayn's huge claw but unmistakably a blaster.

She swore.

The captain's hand went for his gun, but the Khulayn swung round to cover him.

'No!' screamed Bernice.

There was a white flash of light from the end of the blaster and the captain slammed back against the bottom row of bioconstructs, a smoking hole in his chest and a look of surprise on his face. His mouth was working, trying to form a word, but all that came out was an incomprehensible moan.

Captain Dieter Fontana slid slowly to the floor, his eyes closing, his legs and arms splayed out on the cold, icy surface.

The sudden death almost caved Bernice's heart in. It was senseless. If only she'd taken the gun away from the captain... But that would have left the only weapon with the Saraani leader. Despite the fact that he was obviously as guilty as hell, she'd somehow thought that as a priest he wouldn't be carrying a gun.

So much for the sanctity of life. She looked at the Khulayn. 'Why?' was all she could say.

The Khulayn tilted his head on one side. 'He was reaching for his gun. I had no choice.'

Arvaile was staring at the Khulayn open-mouthed, seemingly as surprised as she was. Interesting.

'I'd advise you to drop both those weapons,' said the Khulayn, ignoring Arvaile.

Bernice had forgotten she was holding Arvaile's blaster and Vilbian's lethal cylinder. Typical. If she had remembered in time, she could have made some use of them.

But the Khulayn's blaster was pointing at her. She'd be dead before she could make a move.

'I'll take your advice,' hissed Bernice. She flung the cylinder and blaster to the floor as hard as she could. The weapons clattered noisily into the plastic cases.

Not that she'd have used them, even if she could have. Then she'd have been just one more person pulling a trigger, ending a life.

'You're a priest,' said Bernice hotly. 'Don't you believe in peace and goodwill and - and not killing people, for Goddess' sake?'

'My thoughts exactly,' said Arvaile in a shaky voice.

'I had no choice,' repeated the Khulayn.

Bernice glanced at Donimo, and noticed that he had now regained consciousness - but was wisely keeping quiet about it.

The Khulayn stepped right up to Bernice. 'And now I have no choice again. I don't trust you. It isn't safe to leave you alive.'

'Khulayn, think about this,' pleaded Arvaile.

The Khulayn put his head on one side, and aimed the blaster at Bernice.

Bugger. Perhaps she shouldn't have thrown the gun away.

The Khulayn raised the blaster. She heard a faint whizzing sound as it charged up.

Bernice closed her eyes.

## WAR STORIES

'There is a way out, Moltor.'

Yes. They had told him that. He didn't have to end his days rotting away in the old soldiers' home in Visphok City. And wasn't today the Day?

Moltor sat up, aching fingers pulling at the blue coverlet on his bed. If it was the Day shouldn't they be coming for him? A smell surrounded him: an unwashed smell, the smell of clapped-out glands and bodily decay.

He scrabbled around for his glasses. Where were they? He looked up, saw a blurry vision of blue coverlets, lights and steel bulkhead doors greeted him. A ship?

*The ship. The Day.*

His body started to tremble, and a sharp pain pinched his chest.

Oh no. Not now. Not *now*.

The panic, the pain, slowly subsided, leaving the smell worse than ever. It was the unmistakable smell of sour and desperate old age. And it was coming from him.

Moltor was old. Ancient, outdated, and useless.

*But not for much longer.*

He remembered the poem. 'Once we never thought we would be old...' He had read it out loud once, at a dinner party. He remembered the people, so young, the soldiers in their dark-blue uniforms. Not like these modern purple-and-black ones. People had known something about style in those days.

No, wait - he hadn't read the poem himself. It had been Vleer, that old braggart. There had been a girl - slight, dark-haired, beautiful. Vleer had been showing off to her, but she'd been making eyes at Moltor. Yes, that was right. Hadn't they...? A memory blossomed: but annoyingly, it was Vleer

who Moltor remembered clearest, his young voice quivering with emotion. 'Before the wreck of glory, the songs no longer sung/The soldier's bounden duty is to die forever young.'

False emotion. Vleer had understood none of the real feeling in the poem. Not then. Probably not now. Hadn't he been boasting about that battle with the Octobreeds of Grampus Four again last night? How many did he tight? A hundred, he had said, armed only with a surgical laser.

Moltor no longer knew nor cared if this was the truth or not. Vleer had always been a shallow man, through all the ranks, even when he reached regimental commander. A loyal friend, a good soldier, no one could deny; but there was something missing. Depth. Vleer had no depth to him. He had grown old, and he had never thought about it. Just gone soldiering on, and hang the consequences.

In his mind, Moltor saw the round, craggy face, the laughing blue eyes of the man he had known all his adult life - and suddenly felt an icy hand clutch his chest.

Vleer was dead. Had been dead for - since - when?

So who had been showing off about the Octobreeds? Fyotor? Kallon?

The lights in the room flickered, and Moltor felt the old, familiar tingle of a ship breaking out of warp, the lurch in his guts as impulse drives cut in.

So this *was* the ship. This was the Day.

Moltor began to tremble again, not with pain or fear but with excitement. They were getting ready for - where was it? Saraanis? Dellah. Yes. That was the place. Vleer and Fyotor and —

No. Not Vleer. But Fyotor, yes.

Fyotor, with his shrunk face, scribbled over with lines of pain. In battle, Fyolor had flown too close to a radiation burst, and as a consequence carried around something which was less a body than a battleground for tumours. Moltor remembered his eyes, as yellow as his hair, and his voice, rendered feeble and complaining by his fight with pain.

We must do this, old friend. We must. "For Visphok - for glory", eh?' Fighting talk for a dying man. Or was Fyotor, like Vleer, already dead?

Moltor struggled to sit, squinting around, hands absently patting the coverlet for his glasses, looking for Fyotor. Everything was blurred and misty. His sight wasn't what it had once been. It was as if reality itself was melting, flowing away. Moltor called out Fyotor's name, but his voice sank like a worn stone in the general hubbub. Perhaps Fyotor wasn't there. Perhaps he too was a memory. Moltor heaved himself upright again, saw that the next bed was empty. Flat blue sheets. Gone. He couldn't even remember who - if anyone — had been in the next bed.

Moltor pawed at the covers of his own bed, feeling a sudden rising panic. If this was the Day shouldn't he be getting ready?

Had they forgotten him?

'Don't forget me,' he said aloud. His voice sounded like a rusty machine. A machine that was dying. 'Please don't forget me.'

'It's all right, old man.' A voice came from behind. A young voice, cynical, the words of care hollow, false. Not understanding what it was to grow old. Just as Moltor had never understood, when he was young. Just as Vleer had never understood at all. We won't forget you. Just hold on till we land.'

Moltor managed a smile. 'Oh, I'll hold on, Dr Narian,' he said, pleased that he had managed to remember the name. His hands were trembling on the blue sheet.

Young again. That was what the Czaritza had said. Fight for me and I'll make you young again. Young and powerful, almost invincible. As good as immortal. A force to be reckoned with.

I'll do anything for that, thought Moltor. I'll fight anyone for you. Go anywhere.

There's no limit to the price I'll pay.

## WHEN YOU TIRE OF ONE SIDE THE OTHER SERVES YOU BEST

Bernice opened her eyes.

The Khulayn's blaster was still pointing at her, but it had not been fired. Obviously. She would have felt something, and then nothing.

He hadn't fired because of the sudden shrill wail of alarms kicking in.

Alarms? Was there a fire? Were they under attack? Had someone set them off as a joke?

Whatever, the noise was unbearable, a shrill warbling that bounced off the metal walls of the hold and drilled into Bernice's ears. Well, at least it had stopped the Khulayn from killing her. She clapped her hands over her ears and watched Arvaile walk to a panel in the wall, and turn a switch.

The siren stopped, but Bernice could hear others blaring from the corridor outside. 'What's going on?'

'A distraction,' hissed the Khulayn, taking aim once more.

'Oh.' It looked as if her execution had only been postponed. What to do? Last words? She'd been in this situation so many times that she had them prepared, practised and polished to a shimmering sheen. She breathed in (her last breath?) to gather air to begin them - and Arvaile interposed his stocky body between the Khulayn and herself.

Bernice exhaled, a long gasp of relief.

Arvaile spoke casually, calmly. 'Don't shoot her. She's on our side.'

Bernice stared at the back of his neck, trying to figure out this latest development. Whatever it was, it had to be better than being dead.

The Khulayn stepped back and lowered his weapon. 'I - our side?' he whispered.

'Yes. She's my wife.'

Bernice ground her teeth together. Waaaaa! What was Arvaile up to?

Saving her life, she realized.

Arvaile was now ordering the Khulayn about. He waved at Vilbian and Donimo. 'Secure them,' he said firmly. 'Don't kill them if you can possibly help it. Then check the bioconstructs.'

The Khulayn nodded slowly, shooting a sideways look at Bernice. So *Arvaile* was in charge? Bernice was utterly confused, and must have looked it, because Arvaile said, 'OK, Agent Summerfield, you can stop pretending now. Come outside for a debrief.'

Arvaile walked stiffly out of the hold. With a quick look at Donimo, who was struggling groggily to his feet, Bernice followed.

Outside, in the corridor, Arvaile grabbed her arm and all but dragged her towards the lifts. 'Ow!' said Bernice, whose shoulders ached from the bioconstruct's attack. Her tummy and leg weren't feeling too good, either. 'Do you mind telling me what the hell is going on?'

Arvaile's calm facade had dropped, and his eyes were wide. The shadows beneath them seemed to take up a lot of his face, and he was breathing heavily. 'Shut up!' he hissed. 'Wait until we're out of earshot.'

'Of whom?'

'The Khulayn,' said Arvaile. He skidded round a corner, and they entered the boxlike lift lobby area. Arvaile was babbling, pacing about the place. 'I didn't know he was capable of that, of killing in cold blood. The Saraani are supposed to be a peaceful race.'

'Hum,' said Bernice. 'I'm not so sure. Remember what they did to Vilbian? They'll do anything as long as their religion justifies it. Now, what's all this about? What are all those bioconstructs for?'



Arvaile stopped pacing and shook his head, as if not knowing where to begin. 'They're for Violaine. She's here, on an island, very close by. That's what the alarms -'

'What? We're under attack?'

'Yes. Violaine

Bernice shushed him. Far above, she could hear thumps and bangs, above the ever-present braying of the alarms. Just the sort of sounds you would hear on a ship that was being boarded.

She remembered what Arvaile had told her about Violaine. The Czaritza had last been seen fleeing the Visphok system in a large battle cruiser.

And now she was here, on Dellah.

What was she planning to do? Take over the planet?

'OK,' said Bernice. 'I appreciate that you saved my life back there. Now, can you please tell me why? And why did you tell the Khulayn I was your wife?'

'It was the only thing I could think of that would stop him. '

Bernice felt totally exasperated. She liked to be in control. And now this. 'Well, I'm stuck with it now, aren't I? I'm going to have pretend to be on "your side" until all this is over. And if that's the case, I want some answers. Firstly, I take it you're behind this whole business. And you're working for Violaine. So all that guff about being part of the Resistance was a cover story. Am I right, or am I right?'

'You're right. I was never part of the Resistance. I was a loyal supporter of Violaine. She knew her power was waning, so she trained up Covert Agents, to be placed strategically around the sector. I was one of these, posted to Dellah as a Doctor of Biogenetics.'

Just for a second, Bernice couldn't believe it. Then it all fell into place.

Arvaile had been like two people, Maeve had once said. A loving husband - and a cold, distant, scientist.

Well, as it had turned out, he wasn't only a scientist. He was a spy. And his love for Maeve had never been anything more than fiction.

'You bastard,' she said. 'How could you lie to Maeve?'

'It wasn't like that. I loved her,' said Arvaile, quietly and seriously.

'Oh,' said Bernice, unable to control her anger. 'So that makes it all right, does it? "Now she's dead I realize how much I loved her and how wrong I was." How convenient for you!'

'Shut up!' shouted Arvaile. 'Shut up, shut up!'

Bernice shrank back from him. He obviously meant it. 'Look, I'm sorry,' she said. 'So, you loved Maeve. Good. That means you're at least half-human. But you still lied to her.'

Arvaile had calmed down a bit now. 'I had to lie. I loved her, and the truth would have driven her away,' he said, beginning to pace up and down again. 'I loved her from the moment I saw her, before I even thought of "using" her as a cover story.'

'But use her you did,' said Bernice.

Arvaile clenched his fists. 'Listen to me. It wasn't like that! Of course I had to let my people on Visphok know what I was doing. If Violaine had found out I was marrying a non-Visphoi, she would have recalled me - she might even have had me killed. Racial purity is a particular fetish of hers.'

'She sounds a charming person. Can't wait to meet her.'

Arvaile grimaced. 'I told them I was marrying as part of my cover. Fortunately, they thought it was a good idea. So I was able to marry Maeve with a clear conscience. I loved her, she loved me, Violaine's people thought it was only a cover story.'

'So everyone was happy.' Bernice shook her head. It was a house of cards. Arvaile. Maeve must have suspected something - I'm almost sure she did. You can't hide big, important things like that from your partner.' Unless your name was Jason Kane, she thought ruefully.

'A house of cards,' Arvaile said slowly, nodding. 'Yes, you're right. It was bound to fall. I fooled myself that it wouldn't, but one day, I got the call from Violaine.'

'The call?'

'Details of this mission.' He looked up at her desperately. 'I kept taking one step after another, hoping that it would

stop, hoping that it would just go away if I kept on going, but it kept on getting worse and I -' He broke off, closed his eyes for a second in an all-too-obvious attempt to gain control.

'OK,' said Bernice softly. 'I think I can understand that.'

Arvaile didn't seem to be listening to her. He was caught up in his own confession. 'You see, after coming to Dellah and marrying Maeve, I began to see that Violaine's way was the wrong way. The food shortages, the curfews, the executions that are part of daily life on Visphok - I knew nothing else until I came here.' He was staring at her earnestly now.

'So why did you agree to do this "job"?''

His face hardened. 'Old allegiances die hard. Ask Maeve about her Marunianism - she tried to rebel against that, and couldn't. I tried to rebel against my Visphoi roots - and look at me now. '

Bernice looked, and saw a hopelessly lost man. 'So why have you changed sides again?'

He looked away. 'Maeve is dead. I should never have agreed to do this.' He began to sob. 'Now she's gone. Violaine has taken away my life, the only thing that mattered to me.'

Overhead, feet clanged down a metal staircase. Heavy, booted feet.

'Just tell me what I need to know!' hissed Bernice. 'And make it quick!'

Arvaile stared at her. wild-eyed. 'What I told you and the captain was not the whole truth. True, one of the bio-constructs, the test subject, did kill Maeve, but it didn't happen outside my cabin. It was in the hold. She came spying on me. Accidentally activated the test subject. I tried to stop it - I *did* stop it - but it was too late.'

Arvaile walked up to the wall of the hold and slammed the flat of his palm against it, hard. 'I want to - break something,' he gasped. His shoulders were heaving. He was obviously used to bottling up emotion. Right now, he was on the edge - but he hadn't lost it yet.

'OK,' said Bernice, as gently as she could. 'More answers, please. What's Violaine up to?'

‘She means to conquer Saraanis.’

‘What for?’ Oddly, Bernice felt relieved - at least Dellah was safe. Then she felt guilty about feeling relieved. Some of the Saraani customs may be unpleasant, but they certainly didn’t deserve the attentions of Violaine.

Arvaile shook his head. ‘She needs a new base? I don’t know. I only know this part of the operation.’

‘If she’s planning to conquer Saraanis - presumably using all these bioconstructs?’

Arvaile nodded.

‘Then why is the Khulayn helping her?’

‘In return for his help, Violaine promised to reconquer Saraanis and reinstate the religious orders. It has to be a lie - she wants the planet for herself. Violaine’s used him, like she used me.’ He gazed at her, his face scrunched up with pain. ‘You don’t understand what it’s like, what I came to realize too late. She uses everybody. Destroys everybody. She just doesn’t care about human -’

‘What is this “help” that she wants from the Khulayn?’ interrupted Bernice quickly. She felt sorry for Arvaile, but counselling services were just going to have to wait. One of Violaine’s soldiers might appear at any moment.

A thought struck Bernice. The Khulayn. Theo. Different bodies - no, a mind inside a different body... ‘Bloody hell, it’s got something to do with Holy Transference, hasn’t it?’

‘There isn’t time to explain,’ said Arvaile. We have to get back to the hold.’ He grabbed her arm and prodded her in the chest. ‘You’re my wife, remember?’

‘Hang on!’ yelled Bernice as he began to drag her back towards B Hold. ‘The Khulayn will never believe that!’

‘He will,’ said Arvaile through gritted teeth.

Bernice tried to shake free, but for a small man he was unusually strong. ‘But you’re still married to Maeve! You’re not divorced, only separated!’

‘The Saraani have no knowledge of human pair-bonding whatsoever. It is totally alien to them, as Holy Transference is to us.’

True, thought Bernice, but if certain Saraani had taken the trouble to learn a human language they might have picked up on a few human customs.

They were nearing B Hold. 'But I don't even know what the rest of your plans are!' protested Bernice.

'Shut up!' said Arvaile, in a tone of voice which increased to certainty Bernice's suspicion that he didn't actually have any plans, but was just making it up as he went along.

An out-of-control spy and a conspiracy featuring religious fanatics and a bloodthirsty dictator. Deceit and treachery all round. And she didn't even know what the side she was pretending to be on were supposed to be doing.

Oh, great.

Arvaile shoved her into the hold.

The Khulayn turned to regard her, half raising his gun.

Donimo and Vilbian were chained side by side to part of the tubular scaffolding which supported the plastic containers. Donimo's head was slumped onto his chest. He didn't even look up to see Bernice enter.

He must have seen that the captain was dead.

The body had been covered by a sheet, but the captain's shoes stuck out of the end. They were black and very shiny. Bernice imagined him sitting in his cabin with his tin of parade gloss and shoebrush. elbow fiddling away, buffing his heart out until he could see every hair of his neat moustache reflected in each shining upper.

She swallowed.

No time to think about these things. No time to comfort Donimo. Right now, Bernice had more pressing concerns.

She walked straight up to the Khulayn.

The Khulayn ignored her. 'Arvaile, I trust you have an explanation for this.' He waved a claw at Bernice.

'Yes, I do,' said Bernice. 'I am a loyal Visphoi agent. I was assigned to test your loyalty to the... cause. To see that your own self-interest doesn't jeopardize Violaine's glorious plan!' She saw Donimo out the corner of her eye, gaping like a fish.

'I'm afraid she gets rather carried away at times,' said Arvaile, a painfully false laugh in his voice.

'I thought that Professor Ruthven was your husband,' said the Khulayn.

Bloody hell, Arvaile was right. The Saraani really don't know anything about human 'pair-bonding'.

'She was,' said Arvaile, ignoring the blunder, 'but Maeve was too inquisitive. Pure coincidence she wound up on this pilgrimage. Anyway, I ditched her and got a more willing replacement.'

Bernice grinned through gritted teeth. 'All this is beside the point. What is the next stage of the plan?'

Arvaile indicated the rows of bioconstructs. 'These are to be taken to the island.'

The Khulayn held up a claw. 'But there is one missing.' He pointed at one of the plastic coffins, and yes, Bernice saw that it was empty.

*The second bioconstruct, staggering out of the hold.*

This seemed to put Arvaile off his stride. 'Oh, so there is,' he said lamely.

'Do any of you know anything about this?' the Khulayn asked Donimo and Vilbian, picking up the gun again.

'No,' said Vilbian and Donimo in unison.

'Put the gun down, Khulayn,' said Bernice. She was determined to use her new position of power, however precarious it was.

The Khulayn looked at her. 'I do not take orders from someone I do not trust.'

'Take my word for it, you can trust her,' said Arvaile.

'Why wasn't I told about her before?'

'There was - no need for you to know.' Arvaile was floundering, casting desperate glances in her direction. Obviously he hadn't even heard the explanation she'd made to the Khulayn a few moments before. A fine partner in crime he was going to be.

The Khulayn walked over to her, and peered at her face with a bright green eye. 'Humans are inscrutable things,' he hissed, almost as if he was speaking to himself. 'Their features are bland Their mouths move too quickly, as if they are eating their words even as they utter them. Their eyes are like glass. But somehow, I can tell that you -' he prodded her

in the ribs, right on top of her bruises, which hurt ‘- are lying.’

Bernice brushed his claw aside and addressed Arvaile. ‘These Saraani are as stupid as you said they were.’

Ignoring the presumably outraged hooting of the Khulayn, Bernice walked over to Donimo. He was looking terribly confused.

She was going to have to prove to the Khulayn that she was on his side. Bernice scrunched her face into a fascistic leer. ‘Non-Visphoi scum!’ she barked.

Donimo’s look of bemusement deepened. ‘What are you playing at?’ he mumbled.

Bernice grinned madly and winked at him. ‘Be thankful that we have not decided to kill you - yet,’ she snarled. She winked again and gave a small thumbs-up, then whipped around to face the Khulayn and Arvaile.

Both of them were staring at her. She found this quite unnerving.

‘Now what?’ she said.

As if in answer to her question, there was a hammering on the door of the hold.

The water-mural sang to Mirrium, as he dreamt and communed with Yijioll’s mind. A great circular shield of glass, it look up the entire wall of the Temple. Water entered through the top, and trickled down through coloured tubes and channels until it reached the bottom, where it emerged from a spout, which ran into a crystal font in front of the mural.

The font was for the Washing of the Newborn.

Both font and mural had been smashed by the Renaissants.

Yijioll’s mind was dark, shadowy. His final days had been spent in mourning the death of his creations. Mirrium communed with that part now, trying to understand Yijioll’s sorrow, to learn from it. They may smash our water-murals and destroy our temples, but they cannot touch our faith.

A simple lesson, but a valuable one.

A pounding on his door jolted Mirrium from his trance, and he broke from the communion - a bad thing to do. It weakened the links between host and guest mind, and jeopardized Holy Instruction.

And as he was one of the only three Saraani left untouched by the Renaissance poison, it was all the more important that the birth of Mirrium's child should occur.

The pounding went on, and Mirrium stood up. What was this? Some new outrage, perpetrated by the humans? Mirrium went to open the door, but leapt back as it was kicked open by two humans. Humans with weapons. And they were pointing at Mirrium.

Their appearance was strange. They wore purple-coloured suits of a shiny material - metal? - with black boots, belts and shoulder pads. Their faces were obscured by masks which reflected the light.

They gestured with their guns.

Mirrium had no choice but to be taken from his cabin, and allow them to escort him away.

They weren't killing him. Why? Who were these people?

Mirrium could hear the sounds of human and Saraani screams.

What was happening? Were the humans going to kill them all, now? But why? Why make them suffer so much, and then kill them?

He looked again at the purple-and-black clothes. Yes, they were different. And the humans wearing them seemed different, too. Mirrium was sure they hadn't been on the ship before. It was beginning to look as if they'd been caught up in some inter-human quarrel.

They walked along carpeted corridors, eventually joining a procession of more of the - soldiers? - and Saraani. With relief, Mirrium caught sight of Zyquill, Thlyveer and Loreyn. They looked panicky.

They were herded into the dining hall. Mirrium was the last one in. His every instinct told him to keep quiet, to have faith and wait for the Khulayn to appear. The Khulayn would know what to do, Mirrium repeated over and over to himself. Hoping that it was true.



But no. He was on a different world now. There were different rules. Something told him that here, the individual had to find their own way.

Summoning up all his courage, he turned to address his captors. 'I demand to know who you are, and what this is about. We are refugees from our homeworld. We are on a sacred pilgrimage. We have a right to be left undisturbed.' But they just slammed the doors in his face.

Professor Smith sat in the lecture hall, deciding what to do next in his interesting study of gender politics.

Professors Ingerskjold and Southernay were there, but Professor Summerfield was absent. Again. Despite her assurance that she would be there. A lie, he suspected.

In this meeting, Professor Martine Ingerskjold had decided to take the lead.

Interesting.

She obviously felt that the males were ganging up on her. She'd taken charge, assumed a position of relative power, as a way of getting what she wanted.

It would be so interesting to have Professor Summerfield here as well. Would she side with himself, or her fellow female, Professor Ingerskjold?'

Smith listened attentively to Professor Ingerskjold.

'It is high time we took action,' she said, waving an unlit cigarette about to accentuate her words. 'We should take a vote on whether or not to request to Captain Fontana that we're evacuated. Maeve's murder has not been resolved to any degree of satisfaction. The killer could be loose on board.'

'Why didn't they take us when they took Maeve's body back to St Oscar's?' said Professor Southernay in a tone of amazed exasperation. 'I didn't even know it had happened until the shuttle was gone.'

'Something to do with political situation?' ventured Smith.

'So you have to be dead to get off this ship,' said Professor Ingerskjold.

Smith admired this show of humour in the face of their grim situation. 'Remember also the fact that we are all suspects.'

'That's ridiculous!' snorted Professor Southernay.

'Ridiculous or not, that's the situation,' said Professor Ingerskjold. We have to deal with it. We have to try to get off this ship. Let's be honest: who is carrying on with their academic work now?'

Professor Southernay shook his white-haired head. 'I haven't done a stroke since Maeve died.'

'Nor have I,' said Professor Ingerskjold, a note of triumph creeping into her voice. She lit her cigarette and turned her gaze onto Smith. 'What about you?'

Smith shifted in his seat. Should he admit that he was doing his work all the time? Even now?

Then he remembered his plan. In this meeting, he was to side with the female. Professor Ingerskjold. 'No,' he said. 'Actually, I haven't. And I agree with you - we should evacuate as soon as is convenient.'

Her eyes narrowed. 'Taking my side now, are you?'

'Yes, exactly!' said Smith with enthusiasm.

Professor Ingerskjold slapped her forehead with the palm of her free hand. 'I knew it! This is one of your "experiments", isn't it?'

Oh dear. Apparently the game was up.

'You're trying to play us off each other. In the last meeting, you took Hugh's side, now you're taking mine, and you're going to scurry back to your cabin and note down our reactions! You pathetic scrawny little runt!'

'Steady on, Martine,' said Professor Southernay timidly.

'No, I won't steady on. We at least have the decency to stop work, out of respect for Maeve, yet he... he...' She paused to take another drag. 'We're people, for God's sake! Not lab rats you can set running about in a maze of your own making!'

Smith could feel her anger, and Southernay's embarrassment.

It was like being under the glare of a searchlight's beam.

He was rather enjoying it. Nothing or no one could intimidate him. He was rather proud of the fact.

So when the door of the lecture hall was noisily thrown open by a squad of troops in black-and-purple uniforms toting big chunky guns, Smith was the only one not to leap to his feet.

Smith merely gripped the arms of his chair a little harder, that's all.

The military male (if these were male - hard to tell under all that uniform and helmet) was often interesting to study, and Smith welcomed this opportunity. They clattered into their room, about six of them, kicking chairs aside and advancing up the lecture hall, moving with swiftness, precision and inexorability. Just what you would expect of a well-trained squad of troops. Nothing new here.

More interesting were the reactions of his colleagues.

Professor Southernay had dived under the table, from where his whimpering cries could be heard between the stomp of boots.

Professor Ingerskjold was in the middle of a coughing fit, leaning over the table, hacking her lungs up, tears leaving thin trails of eyeshadow down her face.

The troops had spread out around the desks, and were converging on them slowly, their weapons trained on Smith. They obviously thought he was the leader. Interesting.

Professor Ingerskjold's face had now turned red, and she was wheezing alarmingly.

Smith stood up, the metal legs of his chair scraping against the tiled floor.

'Don't move!' barked the amplified voice of the squad leader.

Smith pushed his chair back and walked around the table towards the stricken woman.

The squad leader barred his way. 'I said, don't move!'

'Fuck off!' yelled Smith, alarmed by the passion in his own voice. He squirmed past the soldier, patted Professor Ingerskjold on the back softly, then with more force, until she brought up.

She sat back down, gasping.

‘Now, who the - who are you, and what do you want?’ said Smith, smoothing down the front of his black cotton shirt.

The squad leader said nothing, stepping closer and raising the helmet visor.

Ah - a female soldier. Interesting.

‘Do you find that your male subordinates have difficulty accepting orders from —’

The soldier stepped right up to Smith, raised her rifle, turned it end-on and butted Smith savagely in the stomach. Smith dropped to the floor, an involuntary moan escaping from him. He couldn’t breathe. He stared at the soldier’s black boots through tear-filled eyes, flinching as he anticipated a kick in the face. Just when he thought he would pass out, he managed to draw in a long, choking breath.

Gloved hands gripped his shoulders and he was hauled upright.

The soldier spoke. Her accent was odd. ‘I told you not to move. Now. we could shoot all of you. Luckily for you, our orders are to imprison you. But step out of line again, you die. Understood?’

Smith nodded, in answer to the soldier, but also in verification of his theory. The soldier’s speech was exactly what he’d expected - brutality, threats and cliches. This could prove very interesting. If they survived he might write a paper on it.

The soldier let go of him and stood back. She gestured with her gun. ‘We’re going to lock you in here. There’s only one door, and it’ll be guarded. If you try to leave, you die. Do you understand?’

Of course I understand, thought Smith. I’m a qualified academic and you’re a simple soldier.

Professor Ingerskjold was staring at him, dabbing her eyeliner away with a hankie, and Professor Southernay had emerged from beneath the table and was standing holding the back of a chair. Also staring at him.

Fascinating. They also looked to him as their leader. Probably best, then, if he acted as if he were their leader. ‘I understand your instructions,’ he said, not having to try to keep

his voice calm; he *was* calm. In control. ‘And I speak for all of us when I say that you have our complete cooperation.’

‘Right, squadron!’ the leader yelled. The other five soldiers crashed to attention, and they all trooped out of the lecture hall.

Smith stared at the closed door, feeling slightly disappointed, massaging his bruised ribs. ‘She didn’t even say, “A simple yes would have sufficed.”’

Professor Southernay gave a vast gasping yawn of relief and slumped over the table.

Professor Ingerskjold scrabbled for her fags and lit up shakily. Now that was an expected reaction; but you’d have thought she would have laid off them, after that coughing fit. Then she began a barrage of questions, not aimed at anyone in particular, thought Smith, but spewed out as a result of shock. ‘Who were they? What do they want? Are they pirates? Where’s the captain? Oh God, they’re slave-traders, aren’t they?’

‘I think they are from Visphok,’ said Smith. ‘Their accent is similar to Dr Arvaile’s.’

‘What are soldiers from Visphok doing here?’ said Professor Southernay.

‘I don’t know.’ Smith sat down at the table. ‘But I expect we shall be informed of their intentions in due course. Or not.’

He picked up his cup of coffee, spilling it all over his papers. His hands were shaking. Interesting.

Now, after the event, he was in a state he could only describe as: shit-scared.

Fascinating.

## VIOLAINE

Arvaile pressed the door control, and with a hiss the door opened to reveal -

Soldiers.

In purple-and-black battle suits and black-visored battle helmets. Bernice recognized their livery. It was similar to that on the casings of the bioconstructs.

The soldiers tramped in. There were ten, twelve of them, all carrying what looked like plasma pulse rifles. They lined each side of the hold, standing stiffly to attention.

So many guns.

Bernice's heartbeat quickened.

Two of them grabbed Donimo, and shoved him to stand next to Vilbian.

The last soldier in wasn't wearing a helmet, but Bernice thought that it would probably be a good idea if he had been. An ugly individual, not so much in appearance, though that was bad enough - thinning crew-cut, piggy little black eyes, slab nose and slit mouth - but in the total humourlessness evident in the set of the jaw. The cruelty in the scarred, lined face. The total dedication in every constipated step.

Bernice found herself standing in a line with Arvaile on her left and the Khulayn on her right.

The soldier stopped before them, saluted - gloved fist thudding into chest - and shouted, 'Lieutenant Lukas Trione, of the Czaritza Ereshkigal Violaine's personal retinue.'

His voice echoed around the hold. Bernice copied the salute, forgot about her bruised ribs and banged them in the act of saluting. 'Ow,' she said.

'Dr Brion Arvaile, Covert Agent 151 051,' shouted Arvaile.

Bernice felt him nudge her.

What was she supposed to say?

'Who's that?' barked Trione, his gauntleted hand pointing at her.

He really had no manners. 'Agent Bernice Summerfield. Assigned to Dr Arvaile for this mission,' she said.

'She's my cover. Don't worry, she's loyal,' Arvaile added.

Trione looked at Bernice as if she were something he'd stepped in.

Bernice smiled sweetly and tried to stop her flesh from crawling.

'Is everything ready?' barked Trione.

Arvaile nodded. 'The bioconstructs are ready for transport, once they have been thawed. And the Saraani are also ready, are they not, Khulayn?'

Trione looked the Khulayn up and down. 'So, that's a Saraani.'

'I am the Khulayn of Iyrzhisa,' fluted the Khulayn with some dignity. 'And yes, my pilgrims have made the ultimate sacrifice.'

Bernice was about to ask what he meant by 'ultimate sacrifice' when she remembered that she was supposed to be on their side. Supposed to know all the details of Violaine's plan.

She felt a giddy sense of dislocation. As though she really were another person. She concentrated, holding on to the eternal still point within her that was forever Bernice: tea. Interesting people. Cats. Fine wine. Vinyl records. Tennis. Justice. Frocks.

'We have secured the ship. There wasn't any resistance. We've put all the Saraani up in one of the dining halls.' Trione smiled. He had a nasty smile, cruel and thin. 'One of my men should be giving them the spiel about now.'

'I must go to them,' said the Khulayn, making a move for the door of the hold.

Visphoi soldiers barred his way.

Trione didn't even turn to look at him. 'You're to come to the island to meet the Czaritza. You all are.'

'I can't wait to tell her of the success of this scheme,' said Arvaile. 'It was difficult, preparing such advanced

Bioconstructs at such short notice. But we did it, didn't we, Bernice?'

'Oh yes. We did it, all right.' Bernice watched him warily, alert for signs of a double-cross. Or would that be triple-cross?

Two of the Visphoi troops were untying Vilbian. Another pair were covering Donimo with their pulse rifles.

'What will happen to the human prisoners?' asked Bernice, hoping that it was a safe question.

'We'll lock them up for now. Decide their fate later. It's all up to the Czaritza.'

As Violaine didn't sound like a particularly nice person, these words were ominous. Still, play the part, Summerfield. She saluted again. 'Hail Violaine!' she shouted.

Arvaile shot her a pained glance which said plainly, you're overdoing it.

Trione's granite face inched minutely into a frown, his basilisk eyes boring into Bernice.

Had she blown it?

'Where did you get her?' asked Trione of Arvaile.

'She's... she's from a colony. Penelope-216. There's a Violaine cult on some of the more impoverished worlds. They consider that the sector needs leaders like Violaine, leaders of strength and vision.'

What utter bollocks. He was quite obviously winging it, and winging it very badly at that. And Bernice had told the Khulayn that she was a Visphoi, not a colonist from Penelope-216, which she had never heard of and doubted even existed. Bernice was going to say more, furnish Arvaile's lie with at least some semblance of realism, but Trione wasn't listening.

He had caught sight of the captain's body, or rather, its shape under the grey tarpaulin, and the shiny black shoes sticking out.

Lieutenant Trione indicated the body with the muzzle of his gun. 'Who's the body?' he said, looking from Arvaile to Bernice.

'The ship's captain,' said Arvaile. 'He had a gun. He was going to shoot the Khulayn, so I shot him. Sorry.'



Bernice was sure that she could see the Khulayn visibly sag with relief.

Trione shrugged, his black shoulder pads exaggerating the gesture. 'No need to apologize. The Saraani are essential to Violaine's plan. You will be rewarded.'

He led the way out of the hold, the Khulayn and Arvaile following him. Bernice took up the rear - or would have, if two of the Visphoi soldiers hadn't been clomping along behind her. She tried to march to the same rhythm, but she couldn't. However hard she tried, she couldn't keep time with the military step.

This pleased her in a very fundamental way.

So she strolled along behind them, watching the Khulayn's white cape billow and rise, and the pink back of Arvaile's neck.

They came to the lobby, and they all squeezed in the lift, Lieutenant Trione's gloved fingers jabbing the control buttons.

The lift was silent, apart from their combined breathing and the low hum of the Khulayn's gills.

It was as if no one dared speak. This was silly. Bernice longed to make one of the many bad lift jokes she knew. Like: if the lift got stuck, who would they eat first? Or: *Phaw!* Who farted? But the situation had gone beyond jokes. Tell a joke, blow your cover, end your life.

From now on until she and Arvaile got out of this mess, if they got out of this mess, she had to play it absolutely straight.

Bernice fought down the hysteria and tried to look outwardly as dedicated and brutal as Trione.

The doors opened. They'd taken the lift right to the top, where it emerged onto open deck.

Bernice breathed in the fresh air gladly, her body beginning to warm through after the chill of the hold. Then she remembered Professors Smith, Southernay and Ingerskjold, Donimo, the student crew and all the Saraani. She hoped that they were all right. It probably made no difference, hoping, but it made her feel better. That was what hope was for. Making you feel better.

Suddenly they were plunged into shadow. Bernice looked up in time to see something sleek and dark glide overhead before vanishing behind the roof of the dining hall. Some sort of spacecraft? How much military hardware did Violaine have behind her?

They passed the main superstructure of the *Lady of Lorelei*, and the greenhouse came into view. Bernice could see the pane of glass they'd smashed earlier that day. It had seemed important, then, that Vilbian communed with Maeve's mind. It seemed irrelevant now. Maeve could never have known that this was going to happen. Could never have known that her marriage was a total sham. It even made Bernice's marriage to Jason look like an honest and pure exchange.

Oh, Maeve, you've been used. No more, though. You're dead now, body and mind. You're out of this. No thanks to your husband, though.

Bernice turned to Arvaile. 'I know why you wanted Vilbian to perform Holy Transference on Maeve.'

Arvaile looked at her warily. 'Why?'

'Oh, come on. Maeve's body is on ice, her mind is inside Vilbian's, you're a biogeneticist. You obviously know of some way to bring her back to life. Cloned tissue or something. Supposing Vilbian would have cooperated - which is highly unlikely - would it have been possible?'

Arvaile shrugged. 'Yes. Her body would have to be repaired, and a new brain would have to be grown. It would take a long time, but Maeve could live again.'

'Not now her mind is dead.'

Arvaile said nothing.

They rounded the greenhouse and walked onto the sun deck, upon which sat a hideously coloured shuttle, a flat ovoid, like a big purple pebble, with fins tapering along its length, and little round black windows. Weapons chutes furled outwards towards its nose. It was supported on four rather dainty-looking legs. Its hull was dotted with scorch marks and what looked like impact craters. Seen some action, obviously.

Trione had stopped, and turned towards them. 'Inside,' he said, gesturing to an open hatchway in the side of the shuttle.

Bernice clambered inside painfully. Her leg was hurting more now, and every time she breathed in there was a pain across her ribs. She strapped herself in to a seat, wincing at the tightness of the belt. The shuttle lifted silently into the air.

The *Lady of Lorelei* dropped away, toy like, beneath them, and Bernice wondered if she would ever see it or Donimo again.

It had taken him a while, but Mirrium had calmed the Saraani pilgrims locked in the dining hall. He seemed to have a knack for it. He could hardly believe how well he was dealing with the situation. He thought, guiltily, that it was probably because he still carried his child, still carried Yijioll's mind. The others, after the shock of their sterilization, would be too distraught to think about anything else.

He looked at them. They sat around, talking in small groups or slumped against the wall. It was clear that none of them had any idea what to do. There was no sign of the Khulayn, or the traitor Vilbian.

Mirrium was trying very hard not to think too much about why the Khulayn might be missing. But he knew that there could only be two possibilities: that he had been detained (or was hurt, or dead), or that, like Vilbian, he was working with the humans.

He noticed that Zyquill was sitting near by, absorbed in his own thoughts. Although Zyquill had not been affected by the sterilizing poison, he was one of the three Saraani who had not been with child at the start of the pilgrimage. So, like Mirrium, Zyquill had lost nothing. He would be able to perform Holy Transference and give birth, unlike the majority of his fellows.

Next to Zyquill sat Brillig, the other pilgrim who still carried a child. Mirrium had no idea why they had escaped the effects of the poison. All three of them had been exposed

to the poisoned water, so logically, they should have suffered the same fate as the rest of the Saraani. Perhaps they were Immune.

Perhaps the GodUniverse had spared them for a reason. One thing was sure, though. Mirrium was going to have to give birth soon. So was Brillig. And that was impossible under the present circumstances.

Brillig was young, and seemed bewildered by events. He was looking around anxiously. 'Where is the Khulayn?' he asked, not for the first time.

'I do not know,' said Mirrium patiently. 'Perhaps he is on his way here now.' He didn't believe his own words, though they obviously satisfied Brillig.

'The Khulayn should be here, in this moment of crisis,' said Thlyveer. The edge of hysteria in his voice was plain.

The others hooted in agreement.

So it wasn't just Mirrium who was beginning to wonder about their leader.

'Perhaps the Khulayn is injured,' he suggested.

This provoked wails of alarm, and Mirrium knew he shouldn't have said it. He'd never quieten them again now.

Then he had an idea. He stood up and hooted for attention. 'We should pray for his safe return to us.'

A silence fell over the Saraani as they raised their heads to the ceiling in prayer.

The prayer would comfort them. But they had not long begun when the door opened and a soldier entered. He wasn't wearing a helmet, so Mirrium could see his pale face.

His fellow pilgrims noticed the soldier and broke from prayer.

The soldier walked to the front of the hall. All Saraani turned to look at him.

Mirrium walked up to the soldier. 'What do you want with us?'

The human had a broad face, no hair - strange for a human - and dark, glittering eyes. His mouth was wide, and didn't move much when he talked, though his words were clear. 'I want to address all of you. Can you all understand my language?'

Mirrium shook his head. 'Only a handful of us. But speak and I will translate.'

The soldier nodded, coughed and faced the expectant Saraani. 'Greetings, Saraani. I am Captain Atem of the Czaritza I Ereshkigal Violaine's personal retinue. You have the Czaritza's personal assurance that you will come to no harm.' He smiled. 'And mine.'

As Mirrium translated this, he could see relief swell across the pilgrims.

Captain Atem continued and Mirrium translated. 'You may be wondering what we are doing, interrupting your pilgrimage in this way. Rest assured, we have your best interests at heart. The Czaritza heard of the revolution on your world. She wants to help you reclaim Saraanis for the religious order.'

As Mirrium translated these words, all his calmness fizzled away, but he tried to keep his voice clear and even.

'The Khulayn is at this moment discussing terms with Violaine. You will soon be taken across to a nearby island, where you will be asked to perform a small favour.'

Mirrium stopped translating. 'What is this "favour"?'

The captain smiled evasively. 'The Khulayn will tell you all you need to know.'

'The Khulayn is our leader. There is no way he would ally himself with an alien power. You cannot expect us to believe your words.'

The captain shrugged. 'Look. I'm just telling you what I know to be true. It's up to you whether you believe it. Now, tell the others.'

Ignoring Mirrium, he walked out of the dining hall and locked the door behind him.

Mirrium turned back to the Saraani. All their eyes were upon him. What could he say?

The Saraani began milling about in panic. Mirrium let them. He felt like panicking as well. Things were way beyond his control.

'Pilgrims, listen to me,' he began. He quickly translated Captain Atem's words, and then added a postscript of his own. 'Obviously, this human is lying to us. The Khulayn

would never ally himself with an alien power. What I ask is that we go along with this until we know the truth.'

There was a general outcry, more wailing and much hooting.

Mirrium let them get it out of their system for a bit, and then silenced them with a piercing whistle. We must be together in this. We must be strong.'

Thlyveer spoke up. We haven't much choice. If we do not go along with this, we'll probably be killed.'

'Exactly,' said Mirrium. 'So, we do nothing, say nothing, until we can speak to the Khulayn. He will know what is going on.' If he is still alive, thought Mirrium. And if he hasn't betrayed us.

But he dare not voice the thought, in case it were true. The Visphoi battle cruiser consisted of three enormous spheres, linked by a metal superstructure busy with weapons ports. On the rear two spheres gaped massive warp engines. On the leading sphere were blister-like pods, their black surfaces reflecting the sun's rays. They looked to Bernice like insect eyes. Spider eyes. She shivered. It was by far the ugliest ship she had ever seen, especially in contrast to the *Lady of Lorelei*, still visible some distance away. And the colour scheme! The ship was a sickly combination of bruised purples and fleshy pinks. It looked diseased, warty, evil, *wrong*.

As the shuttle approached the battle cruiser, Bernice thought for a moment that they were going to vanish into the black maw of one of its engines, but they rose effortlessly above. Bernice glimpsed impact craters and bum marks, and tiny figures in suits crawling over the vast arches of the engine cowlings, carrying out repairs. And as they passed over the superstructure she couldn't help but notice the weapons turrets. There were a lot of them, and the superstructure seemed to go on for ever. The sheer size of the ship had crushed jungle and rock beneath it.

How had something so big got onto Dellah? Surely the authorities would have noticed. Unless Visphoi ships had extremely clever stealth technology.

The shuttle was heading for an oval maw where two arms of superstructure joined the leading sphere. Red lights winked, beckoning the shuttle inside.

Bernice had to say something, to make herself feel less nervous. 'Big, isn't it?'

'Impressive, yes?' growled Trione, a gleam in his eye. 'Visphoi Vugnix-class battle cruiser.'

Bernice nodded, and tried to look impressed rather than nauseated. The shuttle glided inside the ship, and the bright, happy, healthy Dellah sunshine was replaced by a dirty red glow, like something from the innards of hell. They coasted a little way into a large, hangar-like space, and alighted with a soft bump.

The hatch whisked open, and Trione jumped out. 'Come on. We haven't got long.'

Bernice picked up on the urgency in his voice. Perhaps the authorities did know of the Visphoi presence. Perhaps help was on its way.

They marched through the hangar. Bernice saw many shuttles of similar design, mostly damaged, with engineers crawling all over them. The clang and hiss of hasty repair work echoed all around. Evidently, Violaine had only just escaped the bitter retribution of her people. Which meant that she would be pissed off and highly dangerous.

They left the hangar and were led down a pink-walled, rubber-floored corridor. Their footsteps made no sound. Eventually, they came to a set of massive double doors, fashioned out of a stony black material. A stylized letter V was picked out on each of the doors in gold lettering.

Lieutenant Trione punched a control by the side of the doors, and Bernice half expected them to rise up into the ceiling with the sound of clanking chains. Instead, they swung silently open, to admit them into a large, circular chamber.

Bernice walked in with the others. The ceiling was low and lined with red leather studded with brass buttons, as were the walls. The whole room was lit by blood-coloured globes, held aloft by slim ebony figures which Bernice had to squint at before she realized they were just statues. Like everywhere

else on the ship, the area was suffused in red light. Perhaps it was emergency lighting. Maybe the main generator was on the blink. Or perhaps daylight on the planet Visphok was like this - in which case Bernice had no desire ever to visit the place. In one corner, there was an ornate fountain, whose viscous water looked like blood in the peculiar illumination. In the centre of the room were three black leather armchairs and a sofa, arranged around a small coffee-table.

‘The hotel lobby from hell,’ muttered Bernice to Arvaile.

He stared back at her wildly, shaking his head. ‘Violaine’s ready room. ‘

Evidently, this was no time for jokes.

Trione gestured grandly to the sofas. ‘Take a seat.’

Bernice walked over as casually as she could and slumped down in an armchair so big that she felt like she was falling down a mineshaft.

Arvaile and the Khulayn sat together on a sofa, perching on the edge, like naughty schoolchildren waiting for the arrival of a teacher. Bernice smiled at Arvaile, but his face remained pale and serious.

Bernice swallowed. The mood of impending doom was contagious. Bernice found herself dreading whatever was going to happen next.

Trione was in the act of sitting down, when a door in the opposite wall opened and the Czaritza Ereshkigal Violaine strode in.

Bernice knew this because there was no one else in the world that the tall, leather-clad figure could possibly be.

Trione shot back upright and saluted.

As did Arvaile and the Khulayn, and Bernice last of all - it was a struggle to get out of the chair.

Bernice gaped at Violaine. The woman looked so bizarre that Bernice didn’t know whether to look for the hidden gotcha camera or weep with terror.

Ereshkigal Violaine was tall and thin - unnaturally, anorexically thin. Her uniform mirrored the purple and black of the Visphoi soldiers, only it was more tight-fitting, made entirely out of leather, and probably concealed as much smart weaponry as her beloved bioconstructs, which she



uncannily resembled. The only exposed skin was on her heart-shaped face, and it was deathly pale, even in this light. Her gleaming, jet-black hair was arranged in an elaborate, spiked crown shape, inset with red jewels. Her eyes were enhanced with kohl and she wore black lipstick.

Violaine waved a black-gloved hand. 'Please, sit down.'

Bernice sank back down into the depths of the armchair.

Violaine addressed the Khulayn first. Her voice was calm, clear and businesslike. 'Khulayn, at last we meet. I thank you for your cooperation in this enterprise. I know of the great sacrifices you have made.'

The Khulayn spoke - for the first time since leaving the *Lady of Lorelei*, Bernice realized. 'Anything for my faith.'

The poor creature. Violaine had him hook, line and sinker. She exchanged another tense look with Arvaile.

Violaine continued. Her voice was totally at odds with her appearance, though her languid manner and slow, reptilian movements were less so. 'And soon, the religious order will be in their rightful place as rulers of Saraanis. Lieutenant Trione will take you to rendezvous with your fellow Saraani, who are being brought over from the cruise ship shortly. Then you will brief them on what they have to do.'

Trione walked with the Khulayn out of the room.

For the first time, Violaine turned her attention to Arvaile and Bernice. Her eyes were dark and watchful, brimming with cold intelligence.

'An experiment in alien psychology,' she said. 'I have deliberately deprived the Saraani pilgrims contact with their Khulayn, so that when they next see him, they will be overwhelmed with joy and gratitude. Then they will cooperate.'

'Brilliant, Czaritza, brilliant,' said Arvaile.

Violaine inclined her head. 'You have performed good work, Dr Arvaile, in the years since I posted you to Dellah. We must talk later - but as you will appreciate, we are rather pushed for time. I must ask, however,' she pointed at Bernice and the smallest of frowns pinched her face, 'who this person is?'

'My assistant, Bernice,' said Arvaile, the fear in his voice as plain as the sweat on his forehead. 'She helped me develop the bioconstructs.'

It was a different lie to that which he had told Trione, so that made three separate lies to three separate people. And he'd used her real name. But what the hell. 'I am very excited by this project,' said Bernice. but Violaine was already standing up, Bernice forgotten already.

Hmm. Bernice liked to make an impression. But Violaine obviously had other things on her mind.

'Good, good, good,' said Violaine absently. 'I would offer you coffee and brandy, but we must press on. If you'd like to bring your assistant, Dr Arvaile, I will introduce you to the volunteers.' Without waiting, she rose and headed for the door through which they'd entered.

'Volunteers?' hissed Bernice, the image of coffee and brandy - especially brandy - revolving in her head like a vision of paradise.

Arvaile shot her a haunted look. 'You'll find out.'

Bernice wasn't sure that she wanted to, but she knew that she wasn't going to have much choice.

## A WAR IS NEVER OVER, A SOLDIER NEVER DIES

Mirrium sat as far away from the others as he could, his head in his claws. He wanted to be alone, but there was nowhere that he could indulge this wish. He was a prisoner, along with all the others. *Prisoner*. It was a new concept. They had imprisoned heretics back on Saraanis prior to their sterilization, he remembered uncomfortably. This is what it must have felt like - constant panic bubbling under the surface, constriction around the gills, unwillingness to think about the future, about even the next few minutes.

But he forced himself to think. He had to.

The long, windowed outer walls gave onto a view of the sea, the sun still high above the blue waves. In the middle distance Mirrium could make out a flat, green shape. The island.

Mirrium hated looking at the island. It represented all his former hopes, all his present fears. Former hopes - it had been a prospective site for their settlement. Present fears - on that island the Khulayn collaborated with aliens.

As he stared at the vast and stony-grey sea, Mirrium found himself able to believe what a few weeks ago he would have thought impossible. The sea reminded him that all things change, all things were possible. For a start, this watery planet could have been a desert world, long ago. A culture similar to the Saraani could once have thrived here. Submerged now, for ever, beneath the water. How far back did history reach? How far into the past? The Saraani, though an old race, had only been in existence for five hundred thousand years. Just a few drops in the vast oceans of time. What did anything matter?

So it was entirely plausible that the Khulayn - a passionate believer - could become deluded enough to want to conquer Saraanis in the name of belief. Mirrium could understand - but he could never condone. It would mean killing the Renaissants, and however much he hated them, he could never advocate their extermination. Sterilization, yes, but never slaughter.

Though if it were not for the Renaissants, the Khulayn would not be doing what he was doing.

And if it were not for the thousands and thousands of years of unchallenged Saraani belief, there wouldn't be anything for the Renaissants to rebel against.

Cause and effect, wheels and spindles, like a vast water mural, trickling and channelling on with no regard for who or what gets swept away in the process.

There was a commotion at the other side of the room. Mirrium looked up to see that the door had been opened, and a lone Saraani had been shoved roughly inside.

A feeling of joy lifted Mirrium's heart. Was this the Khulayn, come to make everything right? No. A flush of anger coursed through Mirrium as he recognized the newcomer.

It was Vilbian.

The Renaissant.

The other Saraani began hissing, closing in on him.

Mirrium shot up out of his uncomfortable human-made chair. He had to get to Vilbian first. He didn't know what he was going to do when he reached him, he just wanted to -

*Wanted to hurt -*

Vilbian was tugging at the door handle, casting panicky looks over his shoulder -

*Hurt hurt hurt -*

Mirrium shoved his way through his fellow pilgrims, grabbing their horns, pulling their cloaks, an ugly hooting coming from his throat but he didn't care -

*He just wanted to hurt Vilbian, hurt the Renaissant -*

Vilbian had backed up against the wood-panelled wall next to the closed door, claws raised to protect himself -

Mirrium darted forwards, one claw grabbing Vilbian's rear horns and yanking his head back, another pressing on his sensitive gills.

A scream escaped from Vilbian. The sound cut through Mirrium's fog of rage, and he realized with disgust what he was doing. He let go of Vilbian and stepped back, claws clenching in shame.

Vilbian was touching his gills tenderly, feeling for damage. Mirrium copied the gesture, not knowing quite why.

There was an uneasy silence. Mirrium felt as though he should apologize - but he couldn't. He couldn't back down. Vilbian was the Renaissant traitor. It was his fault that Mirrium had momentarily succumbed to violence.

There was a hiss of escaping breath from someone. A hiss that formed itself into a word: 'Renaissant!'

Mirrium turned and saw little Brillig step forward. Others soon took up the cry.

Vilbian straightened his crumpled robe. 'I am no Renaissant.'

The pilgrims were converging upon him. They looked ready to tear him apart.

Vilbian cowered back against the wall. 'Listen, Mirrium. I know what's really happening. '

'You cannot talk your way out of this,' said Mirrium. 'We will commence your sterilization.'

'No.' The voice came from behind Mirrium. He looked round, astonished.

The crowd paired to reveal a lone Saraani.

Mirrium recognized the bluish skin, the pale sand-coloured horns. 'Zyquill!' he hissed. 'What are you saying?'

'I cannot permit this. He is no Renaissant.'

'How can you be so sure?' said Mirrium.

'I know because I am a Renaissant.'

There was a stunned silence.

Mirrium began to speak but his words were drowned out as the massed Saraani converged on Zyquill and bore him to the floor, hooting angrily.

Mirrium dived into the scrum. He could not believe that Zyquill was a Renaissant. Why was he saying that he was?

He heaved Zyquill out of danger, helped by Vilbian. They led him over to the corner where Mirrium had been sitting.

Mirrium sat Zyquill in the chair and turned to the other Saraani. 'Violence is not the way!' he cried, uncomfortably remembering his attack on Vilbian. 'It is never the answer,' he said more calmly. 'We have found the real traitor in our midst. I will question him. before we decide his fate.'

The other pilgrims were visibly restive, hissing for Zyquill's sterilization.

What to do to calm them?

An idea hit Mirrium. 'Pilgrims, pray for the safety of the Khulayn.'

Mirrium held his breath. Slowly, they all turned away and went back to the tables. Soon, they were all at prayer, except Brillig, who hovered on the edge, claws clenched. Soon, even he turned away.

Vilbian was crouched in front of Zyquill, holding his claws. Mirrium paused. That seemed too familiar, too consoling, and his doubts returned. Renaissant or not, there was something different about Vilbian. He'd claimed to know what was 'really happening'. Where did this knowledge come from?

Mirrium dropped to his haunches, resolving to question Vilbian after he had questioned Zyquill.

Mirrium liked Zyquill. That was the problem. He'd only met him a few weeks before they left Saraanis, but he'd never had reason to doubt that Zyquill believed as he did. Mirrium had always advocated the sterilization of Renaissants. It stopped them breeding and spreading their heretical beliefs through Holy Transference and Holy Instruction.

So was it the right thing to do?

Mirrium realized with cold shock that he was beginning to doubt one of the rules of his faith. He'd been willing to participate in Vilbian's sterilization. So why was he doubting now? What was happening to him? The Renaissant was still shaking, his tongue flicking out of his mouth aperture, but his glare was defiant.

'You say "violence is not the way". That is one of our maxims,' said Zyquill. 'Could it be that at last the religious orders are coming round to our way of thinking?'

Mirrium shifted uncomfortably, but he refused to let Zyquill see how his words disturbed him. 'Zyquill. it shocks me to hear you say that you are a Renaissance.'

'It is true nevertheless. I had to admit it. It was the only way to stop Vilbian from being killed.'

Mirrium shook his head. 'But you were almost killed in his place.'

'We do not believe in harming others. '

Mirrium felt a flush of anger. 'What about the mass sterilization? It was obviously you who introduced the poison into our water supply. Why did you do it? To prevent us from breeding?'

Zyquill shook his head. 'No. That is not the Renaissance way.'

'Then what are you doing on our pilgrimage?'

'I was sent to observe. It was rumoured that a member of your order was planning to conquer Saraanis with the aid of an alien power. So we placed our spies on all the pilgrimages. '

'He's right,' said Vilbian. 'The Khulayn is conspiring with an alien power. Ereshkigal Violaine from Visphok.'

So it was true, thought Mirrium. But was it so bad? 'The Khulayn's motives are pure. Captain Atem told us that this Violaine wants to help us.'

'It is far more likely that she wants to conquer our planet for herself,' said Vilbian. 'She's been kicked out of her own system, so she's going to need a new power base.'

'So why does she want the Khulayn's help? What is this favour she wants us to do?'

'I think that the Khulayn has already helped,' said Vilbian in a quiet voice. 'It was probably the Khulayn who did the poisoning. '

'What?' said Mirrium. 'Impossible!'

'Think about it,' said Vilbian. 'The Khulayn is working with Violaine. The pilgrims have been sterilized - on the same day as Violaine's people arrived. I think that this is

unlikely to be a coincidence. Violaine's plan has got something to do with us being sterilized.'

'That is ridiculous!' Mirrium could just about believe that the Khulayn was conspiring with an alien power - but not this. 'Zyquill is lying! He did it!'

Zyquill folded his arms and shook his head. 'I did not.'

Mirrium leant in towards him. However much he liked Zyquill, his allegiance was to his faith. 'Confess now, and we will be lenient!'

'He's telling the truth,' said Vilbian.

How did he know? Perhaps now was the time to start questioning Vilbian. 'How do you know about Violaine, about human politics?'

'I have my sources,' said Vilbian briskly. 'What are we going to do about Zyquill?'

Zyquill wrung his claws together, his calm facade beginning to crumble. 'Just send me back to Saraanis. I didn't poison you.'

'You know that I cannot just take your word for that,' said Mirrium firmly. 'When all this is over, and the truth is known, then we will decide your fate. You must have known the risks when you accepted the mission.'

Zyquill nodded.

'Until then, I will personally ensure your safety, as far as I can,' said Mirrium more gently, and was surprised to find that he meant it.

Zyquill nodded again. 'Thank you.'

Mirrium was unable to meet the Renaissant's eyes. He knew that Zyquill was almost certain to be sterilized. 'So,' he said, turning to Vilbian. 'What are we going to do now?'

Vilbian shrugged. 'What do you think? We're going to stop Violaine from conquering Saraanis.'

Mirrium found this ridiculous. 'How? We cannot fight. We don't even know what her plan is.'

Vilbian stood up to address the crowd. 'I have a plan -' 'The door!' said someone.

Mirrium stood up and turned round, hoping again that this was the Khulayn, come to discredit Vilbian's words and set the truth free.



But it wasn't. It was Captain Atem. 'Sorry about the delay,' he said. We couldn't find a shuttle big enough for all of you, so we had to use the hovercraft. Which had run out of fuel, so -' He coughed, obviously aware of the blank looks the Saraani were giving him. 'Well, if you'd like to follow me, please, I'll take you to meet the Khulayn.'

There was a rustle of voices at the sound of their leader's name.

Captain Atem held the door open with one gloved hand, gesturing with the other. 'Come along, quickly please.'

With a glance at Mirrium, Brillig walked towards the door.

The Saraani filed out after him.

Mirrium felt sick. Somehow he willed his legs to move, after his fellow pilgrims.

Vilbian touched his arm. 'My plan is this. We escape from here and go back to my cabin. I've got some pretty advanced weaponry stowed away.' He gazed into the distance. 'And there's a message I need to send.'

It took a few seconds for Mirrium to realize what he was saying. 'Weapons?'

'Yes! At least, then, we'd have a chance. Are you with me?'

Mirrium nodded dumbly.

They were led away from the dining hall, and down a flight of steps. Mirrium could see the hovercraft at the end of a short ramp which had been let down from the side of the ship. In the distance, the island.

There were quite a few soldiers about. Admittedly, they didn't look too watchful - probably not expecting too much trouble from a bunch of cowed pilgrims - but their guns looked fearsome.

'Vilbian, I do not think an escape attempt is a good idea. Vilbian?'

He swung round. Vilbian wasn't there.

Mirrium looked wildly about. 'Vilbian!' he called.

There he was - disappearing round a bend in the super-structure, his blue cloak flapping behind him.

Soldiers shoved past Mirrium, intent on the chase. Almost without realizing it, Mirrium found himself running after them.

What was he doing? This was senseless - he'd get shot -

Even as the thought formed there was a whiplike crack behind him, and a loud concussion on the white wall beside his head. Mirrium staggered around the corner of the superstructure, covering his aural aperture with a claw, his head ringing, eyes watering.

He could see Vilbian, ducking down around the side of a large tubelike construction. His pursuers flew straight past his hiding place. Mirrium staggered forwards, Vilbian caught his eye, stood up and tripped against the tubelike thing, which emitted a dull clang.

In an instant the two Visphoi troops hared back into view. One of them raised his blaster and fired in one swift movement.

There was the now-familiar crack, a bright flash, and Vilbian gave a wailing cry. He fell backwards onto the deck. Mirrium went to him. If he was dying, then someone had to perform Holy Transference on him.

But Mirrium couldn't, for he already carried a mind.

Vilbian tried to sit up, but his right arm was twisted awkwardly. Mirrium gasped. It seemed to have been shot with some kind of heat weapon - the skin was red and blistered.

Mirrium found himself yanked to his feet, and brought face to face with Captain Atem.

'We genuinely don't want to harm you,' said the human. 'If you cooperate, things will go so much easier for all of us. Now, help your friend up.'

Captain Atem let go of Mirrium, and Mirrium helped Vilbian to his feet.

'Are you hurt?' he asked.

'My arm is numb,' said Vilbian. 'And I feel dizzy.'

Mirrium caught him as he passed out.

Bernice and Arvaile were walking along another pink-walled, rubber-floored corridor, a few paces behind Violaine. The dictator walked with a confident, loping pace, like a panther.

Bernice glanced at Arvaile, alert for any signs of stress in his body language. There were plenty. The way he walked, the angle of his head, the way he clasped his hands together

every now and then. Worst of all was his face. It seemed to have frozen in one expression; eyebrows raised, eyes bulging, and mouth slack.

It was the face of someone in shock.

Maeve's death must be really hitting him by now. What made Bernice feel sad and wretched was her conviction that had Maeve survived, she would probably have come round to a reconciliation with Arvaile. All that stood between them was old ideas, old allegiances. They had loved each other. And now Arvaile was in pain.

A man in this much pain, in this situation, was going to be a danger to himself and everybody around him. Bernice only hoped that he would hold together long enough for them to find some way of thwarting Violaine's plans - whatever those might be - and then get out of here.

Violaine stopped outside a featureless door. 'Here we are,' she said. She still had a relaxed, businesslike smile on her lips. Bernice was beginning to find it rather eerie.

The door slid open and they stepped through.

The first thing that hit Bernice was the hospital smell. It took her right back to bad experiences at field hospitals during her brief spell in military academy. The sour odour of stale sweat and bad breath, with just a hint of liniment and detergent. Not her favourite smell in the world - not anyone's, surely. The second thing that struck her was the sheer size of the place - no military hospital she'd ever seen had been quite so large. It held at least a couple of hundred beds, blue coverlets drawn over humped bodies.

In the middle of the room a space had been cleared, and a couple of Visphoi troops were fiddling with some equipment on a table.

The room was lit by ugly silver lights dangling from its high vaulted ceiling like a fleet of clapped-out spaceships. The floor was tiled in grubby black and white, the walls covered in equally grubby beige plaster.

Many of the occupants of the beds had already been up and about, sitting on their beds, playing games at tables, talking, drinking from plastic cups. Now, every single one of them was staring at Bernice, Arvaile and Violaine.

It took a while for Bernice to realize it, but they all appeared to be very old indeed. Bernice scanned the room quickly, her eyes meeting those of a dull yellow, red-rimmed variety, in faces lined, diseased and disfigured, under white hair, yellow hair or no hair. Their bodies sagged and leant like things of rotten wood. Coughs and wheezes and mutterings provided a continual backdrop of sound.

‘My loyal volunteers,’ said Violaine, her toneless voice bearing a faint trace of pride.

Volunteers.

It hit Bernice with a physical force. What Violaine was going to do to these poor sods was the same as what had obviously happened to the student, Theo. She was going to put their minds into killing machines. With a sick sense of certainty, Bernice knew just how Violaine was going to transfer their minds. Holy Transference - or rather. Unholy Transference.

Which was why she needed the Saraani.

Bernice swallowed, trying to hide her revulsion.

She watched one of the Visphoi troops pick her way through the maze of beds to where they were standing. She was of similar build to Violaine, thin and wiry, with close-cropped black hair, a snub nose and large, dark eyes. ‘Czaritzal!’ she barked, saluting briskly.

Violaine returned the salute languidly. ‘Yes, Lieutenant Vash?’

‘The presentation is ready.’

‘Good, good. Set it to standby. I’ll kick it off myself.’

Lieutenant Vash saluted again, and then went back to the others.

Another Visphoi, a thin man in a plain purple tunic, had also joined them.

‘Dr Arvaile, this is Dr Narian,’ said Violaine. ‘He’s been looking after the volunteers.’

Dr Narian had narrow features, greasy-looking curly black hair and a permanent half-smile. He saluted vaguely and widened his smile at Bernice.

‘How have they been?’ asked Arvaile.

‘Oh, four or five heart attacks, a cerebral haemorrhage, a couple of deaths - but most of them have made it,’ said Narian cheerily, seemingly oblivious to the tall and menacing figure of Violaine.

‘As long as there are no further deaths,’ said Violaine inspecting the back of her left gauntlet with studied indifference.

Bernice picked up on something in her businesslike voice - a mere nuance of irritation. So, she deduced, Violaine needed people like Narian and Arvaile (and his assistant Bernice) to do whatever it was she was planning. That was useful to know. It meant that, for now, Bernice wasn’t expendable.

‘Oh no. They’re all fine now. All raring to go!’ said Dr Narian, raising his fist in a half-salute.

Moans and coughs and wheezes echoed around the tail-end of his words. Bernice had never seen a bunch of less raring to go people. She glanced at Arvaile. He seemed to be with it enough to at least seem interested, but his eyes still bore a dangerous, inward look.

Violaine clapped her hands. ‘Dr Narian, Dr Arvaile, please could you go round and make sure that they’re all awake - gently.’

Her politeness was definitely getting on Bernice’s nerves. Why didn’t she just goose-step around, shout a lot and bark orders like any other mad dictator? It would have been easier to cope with, somehow.

Narian and Arvaile moved off around the room, shaking and prodding the humped shapes. Bernice heard yawns, surprised cries and even sobbing.

It was a pitiful sound, and it rooted her to the spot for a while.

Bernice suddenly realized that Violaine was staring at her. ‘You also. Quickly. I want them all to see this.’

‘Yes, Czaritza!’ said Bernice, performing (and probably fudging) the salute.

Violaine looked her up and down once, slowly, and then strode off towards the centre of the room.

Bernice watched her walk away, wondering if she’d guessed that Bernice was bluffing. She had a hunch that the

dictator was toying with her, putting her more on edge so that she would reveal herself.

If she was, there was nothing Bernice could do about it, other than follow orders and await her chance.

She turned and faced the nearest row of beds. All the Occupants seemed asleep or dead, except for one, who was sitting up in bed, watching her with squinting, dark eyes. She had the uncomfortable feeling he'd been watching her ever since she'd entered the room.

Bernice smiled and walked up to him.

'Where are my glasses?' His voice was surprisingly clear and strong, like the croak of a stout old bullfrog. 'I can't see a damn thing without them. Probably a good thing, in here. Nice to meet a youngster like you.' He sat up a little straighter. 'You *are* young, aren't you? Eh?'

She instantly felt an affinity with the old man. She hunkered down beside him. 'Yes. I'm young - relatively speaking. '

He laughed, a wicked croaking cackle. 'Sit down, my girl, sit down.'

Bernice sat on the edge of the bed. It felt hard and uncomfortable. 'My name's Benny. What's yours?'

'Moltor,' he said.

'Pleased to meet you, Moltor.' She held out a hand.

Moltor's hands remained on the sheet. 'My glasses,' he said, jerking into fussy action. 'Where are my glasses?'

Bernice spied a pair of round wire-rimmed spectacles on the floor just beneath the bed. She retrieved them and passed them to Moltor, who put them on with much squinting and yawning and satisfied 'aaah!' noises. Once this operation was complete he stared at her, his eyes large through the lenses. They were dark, like Arvaile's, but milky with age.

Now he looked like a bullfrog as well as sounding like one. 'My, my, my! *What* a beauty!'

'I think you need new specs,' muttered Bernice, aware that other oldsters were craning their necks in her direction.

Moltor pointed a gnarled finger in the general direction of Bernice's bosom. 'You're not a Visphoi girl, are you?'

‘No. I’m from a colony. I’m Dr Arvaile’s assistant.’ She couldn’t quite bring herself to say ‘wife’, besides which she couldn’t remember which version of the lie they were on by now.

‘Thought not,’ said Moltor. His eyes grew smoky and distant, and he settled his shoulders back into his big white pillow. ‘I knew a girl once -’

The sound of leather-gloved hands clapping for attention halted what Bernice somehow knew was going to be a long, rambling reminiscence from Moltor.

All conversation dried up instantly.

Violaine was standing to one side of equipment in the centre of the room. It was a dome-shaped object, the top third of which was black and shiny. It looked to Bernice like an ancient 3D projector.

Standing behind Violaine Bernice saw Arvaile, with Dr Narian. Should she get up and go to him? What did Violaine expect?

She looked down at Moltor. She knew he wanted her to stay with him, so she did.

His eyes were wide with excitement - and fear. ‘Will it hurt?’ he asked suddenly.

Bernice took the old man’s hand. It was surprisingly warm and soft. ‘No, there’ll be no pain,’ she said.

Moltor smiled sadly. ‘You’re lying.’

She leant closer to him. ‘Actually, no, I’m not lying. I’m just trying to make you feel better.’

‘Your bedside manner leaves a lot to be desired, young lady,’ he jibed.

‘I’ve never lost a patient yet,’ ad libbed Bernice. ‘Well, one or two, but they’re the ones who failed to pay my bills on time.’

He laughed - but hollowly, with a ragged edge of fear. So for all his bluster, he was obviously scared. Scared about what was going to happen to him.

Violaine fiddled with something on her chest; a microphone, Bernice realized, because when she spoke her voice filled the whole room with ease. ‘My army,’ Violaine began. ‘Soon you will live again.’

Violaine did something to the projector, and stood back, leather-clad arms folded.

A rousing fanfare burst from somewhere, and a giant 3D image of Violaine's face appeared in the air above the projector. It spoke, its black lips moving to reveal pure white teeth. 'Are you a retired soldier, able only to look back in your glory days?' came her amplified voice. 'Are you a mercenary, too old to sign up? Able only to reminisce, swap stories as your body degrades day by day? Rotting away in an old soldiers' home, the grudging recipient of charity? Able only to remember days like this?'

Bernice was aware of Moltor nodding along to Violaine's words.

Now Violaine's face was expanding, the camera zooming in on her right eyeball, the pupil resembling a black hole. The pupil grew and grew until it resolved into a spherical section of space, in which a fierce battle was being waged. Small ships of recognizably Visphoi design were hounding a fleet of larger, sleek grey cruisers. And winning, with lots of reckless laser fire and sudden explosions. The sound was deafening - but probably only to Bernice, Arvaile, Violaine and the younger soldiers. Whether the display was a record or a simulation didn't matter - it was having the desired effect.

Gasps and wheezes of awe were coming from all around, and Bernice felt Moltor's papery hand squeeze hers.

'Do you want to fight again?' came Violaine's recorded voice, just before a particularly loud and destructive explosion.

The battle scene dissolved into a whirlpool, which shrank and expanded to become the black, dead eye of one of the Visphoi bioconstructs. The view panned back to show ranks and ranks of them, marching in unison through a battleground, discharging their lasers and flensers against their attackers, who fell in droves before booted feet which marched on, over bodies, over faces.

Some of the bioconstructs were carrying larger weapons: shoulder-mounted rocket launchers, bazookas, portable nukes.



How many of them had been in B Hold? A couple of hundred? A couple of hundred of these could take on Saraanis, easy.

As the bioconstructs waded through a pile of burning bodies, Violaine's voice rang out again. 'I can restore you to your glory days. The soldiers you see before you are military bioconstructs, designed on the twin ideals of Visphoi genetic purity and technological superiority.'

The scene dissolved into a line diagram of two bodies. One male, tall, broad-shouldered and thick-set, the other female, with largely the same features. As Bernice watched, the line diagrams merged, creating an androgynous whole. The diagram filled out with flesh tones, then bits of military hardware, and then the familiar black armour-like cladding.

'I can give you a whole new life. I can transfer your mind wholesale into one of these warrior bioconstructs. You won't be old any more. You'll live a young soldier's life - only as no soldier has ever lived. Ten times stronger, with built-in military wetware. You'll be able to take out enemies who aren't even aware of your existence. Put simply, you will be all but invincible.'

So it went beyond these two hundred volunteers. Violaine was going to conquer Saraanis - but it wasn't going to stop there. It was obvious that Violaine was going to enslave the Saraani and turn the place into a war factory.

The callousness of it, the madness, the sheer disregard for a whole species, took Bernice's breath away.

The 3D image now became that of a space fleet, consisting of ugly, spherical Visphoi battle cruisers. Rousing military music accompanied them.

'I intend to assemble the biggest army this sector has ever seen. We are going to conquer all neighbouring systems and create our own independent sector state. So join me in the fight against impurity and decadence.' The rousing music reached a crescendo, Violaine's face reappeared, military constructs and battle cruisers advancing along either side of the image.

All the old soldiers were cheering, clapping, tears streaming down their faces.

Moltor was sobbing, croaking into his coverlet. 'Yes, yes... to be young again.'

Bernice realized that they actually wanted to be turned into killer cyborgs. She supposed that if she was on the point of total decrepitude she might consider it as well.

But she hoped not.

Bernice saw that Arvaile too was clapping and cheering. Violaine stepped up onto a table, so that she was inside the image of her own head, her pale face merging with the image of her own left eye.

Even from this distance, Bernice could feel Violaine's attention upon her.

Bernice reminded herself to join in the thunderous applause just in time.

But was it too late?

## UNHOLY TRANSFERENCE

Professor Smith was trying to comfort Professor Southernay. It was difficult, trying to calm a distraught person. Smith did not have much experience in that area. He knew why Professor Southernay was crying - Donimo, whom the soldiers had brought in a few minutes earlier, had broken the news about the captain's death - but he couldn't do anything about it.

Smith himself found it hard to believe. The Khulayn, a religious leader, in possession of a lethal weapon, murdering the captain, the person in charge of the ship carrying his pilgrimage? Smith's reaction had been to scoff, and insist that Donimo must be making it up. Donimo's reaction had been one of extreme anger and physical violence.

Smith rubbed his bruised eye tenderly. His body was getting a lot of knocks today. When he breathed in, his injured ribs hurt. Still, it was only physical pain. He knew why it was there, what had caused it, and that it would eventually go away. Unlike these people. He was stuck with them, and there was no way of determining, experimentally or otherwise, how long his confinement with them might last.

Donimo now sat some way down the lecture hall, not looking at or talking to them.

Professor Ingerskjold had taken the news of the captain's demise silently, lighting up another cigarette with trembling hands.

Professor Southernay had burst into tears. He still showed no sign of stopping.

Smith took his hands away from the old man's shaking shoulders. Why wouldn't he just shut up?

'We have to get out of here,' said Donimo.

It wasn't the first time he'd said this.

'How can we?' wailed Professor Southernay between sobs. 'There are guards outside.'

The same objection, from the same source. 'Where are the rest of the crew?' asked Smith.

'I don't know,' said Donimo.

Southernay stood up. 'Perhaps they've all been killed!'

Smith put his hands on the old man's shoulders, and made him sit down.

'They don't want to kill anybody,' Donimo was saying. 'They don't want a diplomatic incident. That's what they told me, anyway.'

'So the captain's death was completely unnecessary,' mused

Smith. 'He didn't even die trying to save anyone.'

'Why don't you shut the fuck up?' yelled Professor Ingerskjold, the first time she'd spoken - well, shouted - since the news of the captain's death. 'Can't you see he's upset?'

Donimo certainly did seem upset. And there was hatred in Professor Ingerskjold's eyes. All this naked emotion flying about. All this good material.

Perhaps he should try -

No. Something told him that the time for experiments was long past.

Professor Ingerskjold stubbed out her cigarette. 'If you had listened to me in the first place and urged the captain to evacuate us to safety, we wouldn't be in this mess!'

Smith thought that he should probably feel guilty about that. It's what they wanted. But he wouldn't - he couldn't. It wasn't his fault. 'I am not responsible for the captain's death, or for anything that has happened.'

Donimo rose and thumped the table. 'We should get out of here!'

'Why?' said Smith. 'I understand that you want to avenge the captain's death, but I don't see what -'

Smith backed against the wall as Donimo sprang up from his chair and ran round the table.

'I have had enough of you!' he shouted, grabbing Smith around the neck. 'I'll tell you what we can do. We can break out of here. We can take the guards' weapons. We free the

crew, arm them, then use one of the lifeboats to get over to the island, and rescue Bernice and the others.'

Ah. Professor Summerfield. Smith had heard rumours about a possible affair between her and Donimo. This could be the motivation behind his desire to escape - but Smith decided to keep quiet about it for now. 'How can we? We have no training in escapology or rescue!'

'You mean you're scared.' Donimo let go of him and returned to his seat.

'Fear is a natural response to certain outside stimuli,' said Smith. He could really let rip on fear; talk them all to sleep. 'It produces adrenalin, and the body is presented with two options: fight or flight

'So, you agree with me - we either run for it, or take them on,' interrupted Donimo.

'That's not what I meant to say,' said Smith, mentally cursing himself. He hated painting himself into a corner with his words - trouble was. he seemed to be doing it quite a lot recently. 'There is a third option - which bypasses the fight or flight responses. That option is to think.'

'That's rubbish,' said Professor Ingerskjold. 'Fight or flight is an instinctive response, to ensure survival in the face of present danger. We're in no immediate danger, so it doesn't apply to our situation.'

True, thought Smith. The situation must be getting to him, fogging his analytical thought processes. 'Interesting,' he said aloud. 'Our situation seems to be affecting the way I am thinking. Has anyone else noticed this?'

'Is there any way we can shut him up which doesn't involve violence?' asked Professor Ingerskjold plaintively.

'Can I assume from all this waffle,' said Donimo, 'that we've worked out that we're all scared. Fine. I admit it. I am a bit on edge too but then my best friend has just been murdered. Now are we fucking well going to do anything about it?'

'I'm with you,' said Professor Ingerskjold. 'If the Visphoi soldiers have orders not to kill us, we stand a chance.'

'But we're not trained to fight,' wailed Professor Southernay. 'We're safer here!'

‘Well, I agree with Donimo,’ said Professor Ingerskjold. ‘What about you. Smith?’

There was an edge of threat to her voice. Smith refused to rise to it. ‘I think we should discuss our options carefully,’ he said.

Donimo groaned and kicked a chair.

The hovercraft skimmed across the Silvasic Sea with its cargo of Saraani pilgrims.

Mirrium sat near a window at the prow. Vilbian had been unconscious for a while, but once the journey had started, he’d stirred, and now sat silent and withdrawn.

Just like the others. Contemplating what lay ahead.

The island looked similar to the first island that the Khulayn had rejected, but as they drew closer Mirrium could see that it was larger, horseshoe-shaped, with arms of lush green jungle reaching out to enclose them. As they drew nearer, Mirrium could see something else, rising above the trees like a mountain. But it couldn’t be a mountain - it was too smooth and spherical for that.

Vilbian had seen it too, and leant forward, stroking his bruised gills. ‘Violaine’s ship,’ he whispered. ‘It’s much bigger than I thought it would be.’

Mirrium remembered that he had resolved to question Vilbian. Now seemed as good a chance as any. ‘Vilbian, how do you know so much about what is going on?’

Vilbian hesitated. ‘There’s no harm in you knowing, now it’s all over. I’m working for certain authorities based on Earth. They approached me at the time of the revolution. They wanted someone in this sector to keep tabs on Violaine. Someone nobody would ever suspect.’ He shrugged. ‘At least, that’s what they told me. Perhaps they had other reasons. They trained me to understand human politics, but I still don’t. Not really.’

‘What did they tell you?’

‘They knew Violaine would be looking for a new base - and the Renaissants always had their suspicions that one of us was plotting with an alien power to reconquer Saraanis. When Violaine left Visphok, Dellah was one of her possible

destinations. And as the Khulayn had arranged this pilgrimage, the Earth authorities suspected that he could be making a rendezvous with Violaine. It looks like they were right. My mission was to gather information and report back. ‘

‘Not to stop Violaine?’

‘Well -’ Vilbian looked at the ship, now towering above them as the hovercraft drew closer to the island. ‘They did say I should try, but -’ Vilbian gasped in pain, and looked away from Mirrium. ‘But I have failed. I can’t even report back. All my communications equipment and weaponry is back on the *Lady of Lorelei*.’

Mirrium’s head swam with all this new information. He concentrated on the one piece that seemed to relate to his own troubles. ‘Why did you agree to work for Earth? Do you think that the Saraani are going to be changed for ever, now that these humans have contacted us?’

Vilbian stared at him, his tongue flicking in and out. ‘I don’t know about that. But the Earth humans have our best interests at heart. It was they who arranged for planets like Quinsidd and Verene to accept other exiles. They were going to arrange the same thing with Dellah, but found out that the Khulayn had already done so. Which more or less confirmed their suspicions.’

There was a bump, then a scraping noise. They had arrived on the island. Mirrium saw sand and forest through the window.

The doors of the hovercraft opened upwards like wings and Captain Atem stood framed in the doorway. ‘If you would all please leave the craft in an orderly fashion and follow me.’

Mirrium helped Vilbian up. The Saraani were talking amongst themselves, their whispers and hoots bearing an edge of fear.

Outside, the sand was warm. Mirrium could feel it through his sandals. It reminded him of home, the home he would never see again. Captain Atem set off up the gently sloping beach and Mirrium followed, uncomfortably aware of the helmeted, armed soldiers who moved to stand impassively in a line.

Vilbian was looking about, his eyes narrowing.

Mirrium knew what he was thinking. 'You cannot try to escape again, Vilbian. You will only get yourself killed.'

'They won't kill me - they need us. That's obvious,' Vilbian sighed. 'But I can't swim back to the ship with this arm.'

They passed through a dense band of jungle, with twisted trees and sinewy vines, through which a path had been cut - no, burnt. The ashes were getting in Mirrium's sandals.

Insects buzzed in the air, to be snapped up by hungry Saraani tongues. Mirrium snared a passing dragonfly, wondering if this was going to be his last ever meal.

And there, in a clearing before them, stood the Visphoi battle cruiser. It was unlike any ship Mirrium had ever seen before. It looked as though three metal moons had crashed down out of the sky into the jungle, cast down by an angry GodUniverse.

In the side of the nearest, smallest sphere, about a hundred metres up, there was a gap. From the edges of this, shining metal arms reached downwards. At the end of them was a large square platform, with a single railing, the front of which had been opened by Captain Atem, who now stood waiting for them, arms folded.

'Please board the hydraulic platform,' he called.

Mirrium could hear murmurs of alarm from the other Saraani, which also must have reached Captain Atem's ears because he added with a trace of irritation that there was nothing to worry about.

Brillig was the first to mount the platform. He beckoned to the others. 'Come on - the Khulayn is waiting for us!'

Mirrium could hardly believe his innocence. Had the last few days taught him nothing? Was Mirrium the only one of his people capable of learning?

The soldiers ushered them aboard. The last one on closed the entrance gate and pressed a large red button on a pillar next to it. With a whine and a jolt, the platform began to rise.

Vilbian stumbled, and Mirrium had to catch hold of him to stop him from sprawling on the bare metal.

'How do you feel?' he asked.



‘Weak,’ said Vilbian. He glanced nervously at Captain Atem, then lowered his voice to a fluting murmur. ‘Listen, we must find a way of stopping Violaine.’

‘Are you mad?’ said Mirrium, gesturing upwards. The battle cruiser was like a planet above them, falling inexorably to crush them.

Mirrium cowered. He couldn’t help it. Vilbian said nothing. They clutched each other, together in fear. Mirrium began to pray under his breath, quickly and passionately. It was the only thing left for him to do.

Maeve had worked it out. She’d worked out what had happened to her, and she was still sane.

Just. It wouldn’t take much now. One touch, and she’d be gone, spinning away into insanity. Down to the bottom of the well where the Devil was patiently waiting for her.

Part of her longed for it. Madness. It was one way out.

So was death.

Madness and death. Other states of being, where consciousness wouldn’t matter any more. Both preferable to being - to being -

A thing.

This thing.

This *godless* thing.

Because that’s where she was. Inside one of the godless things.

There was nothing in her religion - or any she’d ever studied - to even begin to cope with this. Nothing in anything she’d read or seen or heard or even dreamt, with any correlation.

She just had to accept it. Accept her new body. It was her and she was it. She was no longer Maeve Ruthven. She was - someone, something else.

She’d worked out how it must have happened.

She remembered dying (at the hands of a godless thing now she was one oh God oh God don’t think about it file it away can’t cope with it). When she died, Vilbian found her and performed Holy Transference on her.

Oh, she knew all about that now. She knew everything about the Saraani. The communion with Vilbian's mind had flooded her mind with all their innermost secrets. It made everything so much clearer. If only she could get hold of her notebook. If she ever got out of this, she'd be able to publish the definitive paper on Saraani religion.

And then, after she'd died, for reasons of his own, Vilbian had performed Holy Instruction on one of the godless things. That's how she'd ended up here. She remembered waking up - the panic, killing the godless thing, the flight, the hiding.

Why had he done it? Why had he performed this most *Unholy* Transference? Why on her? Perhaps he thought he was saving her life.

Well, thanks a lot, Vilbian.

It occurred to her that what she had undergone was reincarnation. She had died in her old body, and been reborn in this one. No wonder the Saraani were so bloody cagey. Maeve could imagine the number of corrupt organizations who would kill (oh, the irony!) for the secret of reincarnation.

So what was this new body like? Was it the same as the godless thing that had killed her? It had to be. They were all the same. Still, she had to see - but it was too dark. She couldn't see anything apart from the faint wet gleam of oil patches and the indistinct shapes of pipes and conduits. This body probably had infrared night vision, but try as she might she couldn't activate it. She was sitting on the floor of some tucked-away part of the *Lady of Lorelei*, probably near the engine rooms. She could hear the hum of machinery.

Machinery. Was that what she was now? A machine?

No. This body was biological, apart from a few bits of grafted-on weaponry and bionic musculature. Biologically constructed; a bioconstruct. So did she count as human any more? Would she be able to live as Maeve Ruthven? Would she be able to carry on like this?

She had to find Brion. He might even be able to grow her a new body - transfer her mind to it. It was possible. The technology - the science - made it possible. She thought of her Marunian beliefs, of how she abhorred genetic engineering. But she had gone beyond belief now - science

had got her into this mess, and like it or not, science was the only way she'd get out of it. Prayer might help, but God wasn't going to grow her a new body.

Maeve stood up. It was weird, not like moving a normal body, but more like controlling a huge machine. Her limbs felt distant and vision seemed wider, more detailed, and yet further back in her head.

She took a step forward, towards the dark metal wall. It was strange. She felt like a passenger in this body. She'd often seen loaders at spaceports - workers inside giant prosthetic robots, able to lift bulky, heavy objects. That was what she felt like now - only she was a mind, more closely intertwined with the biomachine that was her body. She didn't have to press any buttons, she didn't even have to consciously think: Walk. She just did it. She had control. For now.

Cautiously, Maeve stepped forward, and moved aside the metal plating she half remembered dragging shut 1.07 hours ago.

Another thing. She had gained a much more acute appreciation of time, temperature, gravity, air pressure - all the little processes and entropies that went on invisibly all the time. Things only God could see, only God could control. She had no business knowing these things. But the wetware which was wired into the brain she now inhabited left her no choice in the matter.

She lifted the plating aside (10.72 kilograms, 3 metres by 2, 10 millimetres thick) and stepped out of the wall into a harshly lit area, which she knew to be an access corridor running from the cargo deck to the engine room.

She looked down at herself. Her body was black and glistening, the torso exo-armour merging seamlessly with her long, gleaming black, muscled limbs. Her breastplate bore a gold V emblazoned in the centre. Her hands were black and shiny, and she somehow knew that bladelike claws could be extruded from slits in the fingertips for close combat.

God. she was a killing machine.

What else?

Tiny holes in her upper arms. What were they?

Oh.

Apertures, from which neurotoxin-bearing spines could be shot just by flexing a muscle.

And in her mouth, venom glands. She could spit on someone and kill them.

And secreted in pouches along her torso were various types of micro-grenades.

What what what else?

Maeve clenched her right arm, almost involuntarily. As she did so, a slit above her wrist puckered into a wrinkled oval and a tube snaked out. What was that?

Matter-dispersal beam, known commercially as a Skailon flenser.

That was what she had used to destroy the other bio-construct.

To kill someone. To kill -

Best not to think about that, for now.

Maeve unclenched her fist and the tube snaked back in with a slurp and a pop.

And what was that on her left arm? A more rigid black tube, flush against the thick black flesh, barely the width of a pencil.

Needle laser, armour-piercing to five hundred metres, fatal range to an unarmoured target ten kilometres.

*Snick.*

And the laser was armed.

There was an escalating whine as the capacitor charged up.

Maeve felt a bolt of panic. She relayed an instruction - just in time.

The whine died away.

She shut her eyes for a moment.

What else? How many more ways of killing did she now possess?

Nothing. That was it. Of course, before combat she would be issued with external weaponry, and her bioware would receive full upgrades.

Sweet Marunia, she was a walking weapon. Exactly the same as the thing that had killed her. ..

*Hands around her throat, squeezing, squeezing.*

*She raised her hands, big, black, powerful.*

*The hands that killed you were like this.*

Maeve felt a dizzying, rushing sensation. Oh God, she was losing control again. And when that happened, the wetware seemed to take over. She'd already lost control once, when she'd killed the other bioconstruct. She'd had some sort of seizure and the wetware had taken over and moved her to safety, to a hiding place. She remembered both incidents as you remember a dream on waking. That is, fleetingly, incompletely and in the wrong order. So whatever happened, she had to stay calm. If she panicked, it would take over again.

Whether this was intentional or a wetware fault, she didn't know or care - she only knew it could happen, and that controlling it was essential for not only her survival but also the survival of everyone and everything else around her.

Lose control, and you kill.

Lose control, and you die.

Maeve fought to keep down her sense of rising panic, tried to be calm, to analyse. She reached out her hands and pressed them against the metal wall. She could feel its coolness, if she concentrated. There must be sensors in the hands, she thought. She could even tell the exact temperature and composition of the wall: 12 degrees Celsius, steel/plasteel alloy.

The facts calmed her, and she was once again in control. Now to find Brion.

Maeve took her hands away from the wall, and headed along the corridor towards the lifts. She pressed the button for the passenger deck. After a short trip the lift doors opened, and Maeve strode out into the carpeted, pastel-hued, passenger-deck lobby. As she moved along the corridor towards Brion's cabin, she realized that there was nobody around. The ship seemed eerily empty. Where was everybody?

Then she was gripped with a need she could not ignore. A hunger the like of which she had never felt, a gnawing, insistent longing. She turned down a side corridor and headed straight for the galley, unable to stop herself. Inside

the long tiled room with its shining steel sinks, ovens and hoods, she made a bee-line for the refrigerator.

She took out a four-pint container of milk, and downed it in long gulps, her breath whistling through her nose as she drank. Throwing the empty carton to the floor, she took out a plate of raw liver, removed the wrapping and devoured the Wet meat, shovelling it greedily into her mouth.

I don't want to do this I'm a vegetarian I've never eaten meat never tainted my body -

But that body was dead. Dead - but where? Frozen on the ship somewhere? Perhaps she should try to find it no no madness madness -

Stay calm. Calm calm calm. This body needed sustenance so just go with it. The wetware was telling her what to eat, and it would tell her when to stop.

When at last she stopped, she had eaten: a dozen raw eggs, eaten whole complete with shells; a bag of sugar; a slab of (cold) vegetable sabzi, a brick-sized bar of chocolate; a large wedge of sweaty Stilton; a jar of molasses, three pots of honey and an Eccles cake.

She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, astounded at the amount she had just consumed. Why did the wetware think she might need that much fuel?

Perhaps it was preparing her for battle.

Maeve felt uncomfortably like an unwanted guest in this body. The wetware's function was to keep the bioconstruct going, and provide an interface between the bioweapons and the controlling mind. It was loyal to the body, and would keep it going at all costs. Of course, the intended controlling mind was a soldier, who would revel in this - not a confused and terrified Professor of Comparative Religion whose only combat experience was arm-wrestling.

Stay calm. Stay calm.

Maeve left the galley, and made her way to Brion's cabin. The door was open. Inside, everything was neat. Brion was nowhere to be seen.

She stopped in front of a mirror, and for the first time caught sight of her new face. She stood there for what seemed like for ever, unable to move. The face was pale,

dead, lifeless. It was androgynous, like a shop window dummy. The skin was shiny and white, contrasting sharply with the black of the body. Its eyes were dark orbs (enhanced with telescopic and infrared sight). Its hair was thick and black, cut in a rough bell.

Maeve blinked, and the reflection blinked. She touched her face, and so did the reflection.

Oh God, this was her. This was what she looked like.

*Stay calm stay calm stay calm -*

She tried to make it smile, but it couldn't. The godless thing

*which was her*

couldn't smile

*which was her*

couldn't feel

*which was her*

Insanity beckoned.

Maeve screamed.

Her reflection screamed, the mouth opening in a slack yawn, the eyes widening, and wailing, gurgling sounded tearing from its

*from her*

throat and oh God -

Maeve felt as if she were flying backwards. Her vision misted red. Numbers and lines and schematics scrolled downwards across her vision -

And everything was a blur, a red blur, and a sizzling crunching sound came from somewhere far away and Maeve was on the lip of the well and the Devil was calling and she could almost make out his words -

Maeve fought to gain control, trying to claw her way back to the front of this brain she occupied.

At last, she managed it. The numbers vanished, her vision returned to normal, and Maeve could see what she'd done to Brion's cabin.

She'd sliced it up with her laser. Furniture lay in blackened, steaming layers. She could smell burning. She quickly checked for any fires, but there were none.

God, she had to find Brion. Had to get out of this body. The cargo deck. There was a chance he would be there. She ran out of the cabin, and along to the lifts. Maeve entered the lift, and punched the button for the cargo deck.

Keep calm. Brion will help. He never intended this to happen.

The lift doors opened, and Maeve walked through the lobby and down the corridor, hearing, to her great surprise, shouted instructions and loud noises coming from B Hold.

She peered around the door. Soldiers were everywhere, attaching grapples to the stanchions and girders. The sound of melting ice tinkled and trickled.

Where had these soldiers come from?

Then she noticed that they were wearing uniforms similar to her own.

Visphoi uniforms.

Visphoi troops.

*Violaine* troops.

So Brion *had* been lying, God help him.

She looked about, but there was no sign of Brion.

She had to find out what was going on, what all these bioconstructs were for.

The far wall had been removed, and Maeve could see shuttles hovering, stark shapes against the blue sky. They were obviously being taken somewhere. Maeve reasoned that wherever they were being taken, Brion was likely to be.

All the activity was at the far end, around the chains connecting the hold to the shuttles. Maeve slipped inside the hold. None of the soldiers had seen her.

She saw the sarcophagus in which she had been reborn. She quickly stepped inside and closed the cover above her.

And waited.



## WHO HAD FAITH, WHO BETRAYED?

For a moment, Mirrium thought he was back inside a Temple of Beginning on Saraanis. The light was blue, the light of birth, and it touched Mirrium deeply, for a moment, just a moment. Until he saw that it was not the light of the sun Raan-Saar refracted through a blue stained-glass window, but artificially created light, spilling out from blue globes set into the walls.

An illusion.

But the curved couches, even a water-mural on the furthest wall, were all genuine. Mirrium moved closer to the water-mural, feeling Yijioll's mind stirring within his. *Not a great example and there are bits missing.*

The others were all wandering around, touching the walls, momentarily lost in wonder, some overcome by emotion.

'The Khulayn must have arranged all this,' mumbled Vilbian.

A Temple of Beginning on an alien battle cruiser? What was the point of it? Mirrium shook his head and sat down, making sure Vilbian was all right. He wanted to keep his an eye on Zyquill as well, but he couldn't see him amongst the others.

Suddenly, there were cries and hoots of joy.

Mirrium looked up. There, on a low platform in front of the water-mural, stood the Khulayn.

Mirrium felt an almost physical sense of foreboding. Now he was going to hear it. The reason for all this illusion, all this madness.

'Pilgrims,' began the Khulayn. 'It pleases me to see you all safely here. It grieves me that you have all been sterilized - but that might not turn out to be as awful as you think, as you'll come to understand.'

There were murmurs from the Saraani.

What did the Khulayn mean? How could sterilization possibly be anything other than awful?

'They'll tear him apart when they find out he's responsible for the sterilization,' Vilbian whispered.

'If he's responsible,' said Mirrium, still hanging on to the last shreds of his trust, his hope, his belief.

The Khulayn continued. 'I must ask of you, my pilgrims, if you have discovered the Renaissant traitor amongst you? The evil heretic who brought about your sterilization.'

'Zyquill! Zyquill!' came a chorus of voices.

Zyquill was shoved to the front of the ersatz temple, wailing in terror. He was pushed onto the stage to cower in front of the Khulayn.

'A scapegoat,' said Vilbian.

Mirrium didn't know what to think. He wanted to believe in Zyquill's guilt and the Khulayn's innocence, but knew in his heart that it was the Khulayn who must be guilty.

'What have you to say for yourself, Renaissant?' boomed the Khulayn.

'I didn't do it. I didn't.'

There were hoots of derision from the crowd.

'The traditional punishment for Renaissants is sterilization,' said the Khulayn. 'But your crime is unprecedented in the history of Saraanis. You have caused the deaths of many .Saraani young, and sterilized the parents. As Khulayn, I now pronounce your death sentence.'

The whole hall fell silent, except for Zyquill's sobs.

And then Mirrium knew. However extreme the crime, the death sentence had never existed on Saraanis. It was an alien concept. And here was the Khulayn embracing it as fully as a holy ritual. Mirrium realized that the Khulayn wanted to kill Zyquill because the dead can't speak, can't proclaim their innocence.

He stood up to speak, but Vilbian grabbed his hand.

'Don't. If you say anything now, you'll be killed as well. The Khulayn will bend the truth to whatever he wants it to be.'

The Khulayn was speaking again. 'I know how we, worshippers of the GodUniverse, forbid acts of violence. But

the time has come when we must fight back. We must say to the Renaissants, no more! You do not cast us out of our home! You do not sterilize us!’ The Khulayn drew out a blaster from inside his robes. His voice had dropped to an icy whisper. ‘You will die, Renaissant, and Holy Transference will be denied you.’

Zyquill fell to his knees, his claws reaching out to the Khulayn in supplication. ‘No! Please listen to me! I did not poison you!’

Mirrium’s eyes were fixed upon the Khulayn’s blaster. It was dirty and black against the Khulayn’s pale, shiny claw.

He couldn’t do it, surely. This was a bluff. It had to be.

Zyquill turned to the crowd. ‘You must believe me!’

Mirrium watched helplessly as Loreyn climbed upon the platform next to the Khulayn, his green eyes bright with fury. ‘Khulayn, let me do it! Let me kill the Renaissant!’

The others were hooting, whistling, hissing - baying for Zyquill’s blood.

‘No!’ Mirrium cried. ‘Can’t you see what’s happening?’

But his voice was drowned out in the clamour.

And the Khulayn was aiming the blaster.

And Zyquill was backing away but Loreyn grabbed his horns, forcing him to kneel on the platform.

Zyquill let out a final, chilling wail.

And the Khulayn fired.

The room filled with the smell of smoke and burnt flesh. Slowly, the pilgrims backed away from the body. Mirrium sank to his knees, his vision swimming, seeing the clawed feet of his fellow pilgrims and their flowing cloaks, and feeling no affinity with them whatsoever.

He felt Vilbian’s claw on his shoulder. ‘They have been sterilized, Mirrium. Imagine if you had been too. You might think as they do.’

Mirrium shook his head. ‘Never. Whatever happens to the individual, belief holds true. You yourself had a child aborted and you did not clamour for Zyquill’s death.’

‘You know that was different.’ said Vilbian. ‘My guest mind was alien. The child had to be aborted.’

‘So you felt nothing? Your judgement was unaffected?’

Vilbian turned away. 'I had - still have - an allegiance to Earth. I had to carry out my mission.'

The pilgrims had settled once more. The smoke was slowly clearing from the air, curling in wraiths around the Khulayn's black cloak, which Zyquill had torn in his supplication, in his fear and panic.

Zyquill was dead. Zyquill, who Mirrium had befriended. Zyquill, a Renaissant. Mirrium felt a deep, aching grief, and a sense of shock that he felt such sympathy for a Renaissant and none for the Khulayn, the leader of his order.

The Khulayn was speaking. The voice reached Mirrium as though from far away. 'What Zyquill has done to you is evil beyond our understanding. But there is a way we can avenge ourselves, by more than just killing him. Many of Violaine's troops are old. dying. She has built new bodies for them. Although sterile, we can still perform Holy Transference. All we need to do is transfer the minds to the new bodies. And then she will have an army, which will conquer Saraanis in our name!'

Silence. A few nervous hoots and grunts.

'So that's what those bioconstructs are for!' said Vilbian.

What was he talking about? What were 'bioconstructs'? Mirrium felt as if he were sinking in a sea of lies, corruption and confusion.

He'd spoken out against the Khulayn before. What was the harm in doing so now? Mirrium didn't care if the Khulayn shot him. What was there to live for now? 'Performing Holy Transference on aliens is forbidden!' Mirrium shouted.

The Khulayn turned his gaze upon him. 'Was forbidden. Much has changed. Pilgrim Mirrium. Our laws must change.'

Others were nodding in agreement. 'Now that we cannot conceive, what is the harm in it?' said Thlyveer.

'For the glory of Saraanis!' cried Brillig.

'Are you stupid?' said Mirrium. 'The Khulayn himself sterilized you - he is using you! This temple is just a palliative gesture!'

Vilbian grabbed his arm again, but Mirrium shook him off.

'You're being used! Can't you see that?'

But Mirrium could see he had lost them. The fools so wanted to believe the Khulayn that they'd swallow anything, as long as the Khulayn said it was so.

'Mirrium, you are sadly misguided,' said the Khulayn 'But I forgive you.'

'Even so,' said Mirrium, 'I cannot help with this insane plan. I am with child. And so is Brillig. Vilbian also - he's not with child, but he escaped the sterilization.'

The Khulayn nodded. 'You can help in other ways. I myself am sterile.' He paused for effect. 'Due to illness, I cannot conceive.'

'That's a lie. He probably sterilized himself,' whispered Vilbian.

Mirrium wasn't even surprised. It was obvious now that the Khulayn was capable of anything.

'You will help. Pilgrim Mirrium,' said the Khulayn. His voice was like the chill winds on the Holy Mountain of Saraan.

All the other Saraani were looking at Mirrium.

Mirrium nodded and sat down. He didn't have the heart to argue any more.

Moltor had expressed a desire for a spot of mild exercise, so they were taking a walk around the volunteers' ward, Bernice walking slowly so that his short legs could keep up. He seemed to relish the prospect of having new, longer, biomechanical legs. His enthusiasm made Bernice feel a strange mixture of sadness and horror. Didn't they realize what was going to be done to them? That they were going to be turned into *things*?

'What do you understand about what is going to happen to you?' asked Bernice.

'I'm going to be young again,' Moltor said triumphantly.

'Do you know how?'

'Why, don't you?' said Moltor suspiciously.

'Of course I know,' said Bernice, looking over her shoulder anxiously at Violaine, who was now deep in conversation with her lieutenants, as calm and businesslike and terrifying as ever. 'I worked on the project with Dr Arvaile. I just want

to know if Violaine has explained things clearly enough for you.'

'Oh yes,' said Moltor happily. 'She's explained everything. We're going to be given pills, to put us to sleep. And there is this race of aliens - Sarnies or something - who have this ritual which can transplant minds. And they've agreed to do it on us!' He sounded as if he could scarcely believe his luck.

Bernice didn't believe the poor old sod was lucky at all. This was exactly what she'd feared. 'Yes, that is correct,' she said brightly, feeling her heart sink to her boots.

She'd seen it happen, after all. She'd seen the result: Theo. And what had happened? He'd tried to kill her. He'd killed Maeve. And then he'd tried to kill Bernice again. And then a second bioconstruct had saved her.

*A second bioconstruct had saved her.*

Why? And how? There could be any reason: another failed experiment, another test subject? Whatever, the process was obviously unstable. It obviously drove you mad. And if it happened to these confused old people... it would probably validate the old cliché, a fate worse than death. Looking at Moltor's face, alight with hope, she couldn't bring herself to tell him that. No, let him believe he is going to be reborn.

But she had to find a way to stop this.

Perhaps she could tell Violaine. Tell her that both Dr Arvaile and herself had discovered a fault in the process. Save these volunteers a descent into madness, save the Saraani, save Saraanis, save probably quite a lot of other planets as well.

But Violaine would probably shoot her and go ahead with the plan anyway.

Goddess, she felt so powerless! Was there nothing she could do?

The least she could do was make this old soldier's last moments bearable. And then, if the opportunity present itself, she'd bugger up Violaine's plan. Bung a spanner in the works. Something. Anything.

She became aware that for the last minute or so Moltor had been churning out a very long and gory war story, and

accordingly arranged her features into a suitable expression' of attentiveness. Wheezing a little, Moltor stopped talking suddenly and sat down on the blue coverlet of a vacant bed. 'Oh, dear,' he said, with a hand to his chest. 'Oh dear, not now.'

Bernice knelt in front of him. 'What is it?'

'It's my heart.' He smiled. 'Not that I'll be needing it much longer.'

Bernice looked into his eyes and said gently, 'You'll be all right. Don't worry. I'm going to take good care of you.'

She meant it, too. She just hadn't the faintest idea how she was going to do it.

She stood up, looked around, saw Arvaile crossing the room towards her, looking more terrified out of his wits than usual. Oh goody. This was the last thing she needed right now. His body language was so obvious that Bernice was amazed that she was the only one to pick up on it.

'They're here,' he said breathlessly.

'What are here?'

'The bioconstructs. And the Saraani. Violaine's going to do it, and do it soon.'

Bernice ushered Arvaile away from Moltor, who was beginning to look unnerved by the man. 'It's never going to work,' she whispered. 'We both know how unstable the process is. Theo killed Maeve, for Goddess' sake.' She frowned. 'And I'd like to know why Theo ended up inside one of those things.'

'We had to test the bioconstructs,' muttered Arvaile, looking down. 'We had to, before setting out. Those were my orders. The only way was to - Oh, I wish I had never started this!'

'So do I,' said Bernice. 'Look - Theo obviously couldn't control the bioconstruct. He told me about voices in his head. The process is unstable. Which means that very soon we'll be surrounded by a couple of hundred reincarnated schizoid geriatrics in bioengineered bodies capable of dropping a squad of Chelonians at a hundred metres!' she hissed. 'We certainly aren't going to be able to stop her then!'

Arvaile rubbed his chin, which was peppered with several days' stubble. 'Not that many. There are only thirty Saraani, remember?' said Arvaile. 'It's going to take some time to transfer all of them.'

'Only thirty. Oh, that's all right then. Don't know why I was so worried. Tell you what, I'll take on half, you take on the other half.'

Arvaile shook his head gravely. 'We can't fight them. It's impossible.'

'Good grief, total sense of humour failure! Arvaile, please pull yourself together. You might not care if you ever leave this ship in one piece, but I'm rather attached to my body. So, think! What are we going to do?'

Arvaile raised his hands to his head. 'I'm sorry, Bernice. Something seems... Something's wrong with me.' His voice was thick with emotion. 'I can't stop thinking about Maeve... I try, but I can't.'

The man was in shock, Bernice remembered. She'd been there herself a few times. And when she had, all she'd wanted to do was crawl under a big duvet and cry for hours on end. So she had. Quite obviously, Arvaile couldn't avail himself of such necessary therapy right now. He was a danger to himself and to her, but Bernice felt responsible for him. Despite all he'd done, he was paying for it now. That showed he was a half-decent person, underneath it all.

If she couldn't comfort him, she had to try to snap him out of it. Give him something to do that he could cope with. 'Listen,' she said, 'the only way I can think of preventing this insanity is by getting to the Saraani, and persuading them not to take part. Where are they being held?'

But Arvaile wasn't listening to her. He had turned to look into the middle of the room, where Violaine stood. As Bernice looked up, she saw the dictator nod to Lieutenant Vash, standing by a steel bulkhead.

'It's too late,' said Arvaile in a hushed voice. 'It's started.'

And then all the lights went out.



Maeve had been unable to see anything throughout the brief journey from the *Lady of Lorelei* to the Visphoi ship. All she could glimpse through the frosted plastic lid of the sarcophagus was light, and vague shapes.

It had been terrifying, being carried across the water by Visphoi shuttles. The entire hold had rocked alarmingly, and she'd had to brace herself against the walls of her coffin-like prison. Of course, the Visphoi soldiers weren't expecting any of the bioconstructs to be containing a conscious mind.

Landing had been even worse. Horrendous scraping noises, juddering thumps, shouted instructions, and a lot of tense, nervous waiting. Eventually, the soldiers had attached the scaffolding holding the two hundred sarcophagi to some sort of conveyor belt, and she'd been trundled along, until she came to rest in a dark room somewhere deep in the bowels of the ship.

And now the soldiers were coming along the rows, opening and discarding the lids of the sarcophagi.

Maeve panicked as she heard them come closer. Would they be able to see that she was alive?

The moment she heard them start fiddling with the lid of her sarcophagus, she closed her eyes.

A voice. 'This one looks different.'

Maeve kept her eyes closed, and tried to keep the feeling of panic down.

'How different?' came another gruffer, bored-sounding voice.

'Well, they've been thawed out, right? Ready for action.'

'Yes?'

'So, in all the others, there's pools of water at the bottom. When I opened them, I had to step back because it all slopped out. But when I opened this one - nothing. Dry as a bone.'

She heard the other soldier sigh. 'So the water trickled out of a hole somewhere. Stop wasting my time. Private Sveck. You know how impatient Violaine is to get off this dirtball.'

Hearing the dictator's name confirmed it. Brion had been lying. All this time, through all their marriage. What did love

do when it came up against a truth like that? It bowed its head and crawled into a dark corner to die.

*Don't think about it you'll only get angry and set off the wetware don't think don't think -*

Maeve heard the soldier move off, and opened her eyes.

She instantly closed them again, as the bright light seared her retinas. Couldn't she do something about that?

Yes.

She narrowed the aperture of her pupils, and opened her eyes again to see -

A blank metal wall, covered in scratched and peeling purple paint a metre from her face. She could make out its every detail, every nick and flake.

She strained her hearing for signs of the soldiers. She could hear an amplified voice from the other side of the wall, and martial music, but no footsteps or sullen conversation.

She leant part way out of the cabinet. To either side, rows and rows of cabinets, all with their lids removed so that the constructs - all with faces like hers, pale, androgynous - faced the metal wall. She looked up; another row, above her, supported on the scaffolding.

Best if she got out of here, now. Best if she tried to find out what was happening. It was still possible that she could find Brion. It was still possible that he might help her, even if he was on Violaine's side now.

She was just about to move when the wall gave a shudder, and began to rise up with a smooth humming sound.

As soon as the lights had gone out, Moltor had grabbed Bernice's hand. The darkness, which was absolute, had lasted only a few seconds before a blue spotlight picked out the tall, black-clad figure of Violaine. She was standing on a podium in the middle of the room.

'Volunteers,' she said, her voice amplified through her chest-mike, 'now is the time. Your new bodies await. Glory awaits. Immortality awaits!'

Martial music started pumping through the hidden speakers. The blue spotlight made Violaine look even more bizarre. As the music reached its crescendo, Violaine's voice

rose to match it. 'Behold the new dawn! Behold the new age of Visphok rule! Behold - your future!'

Violaine spun round and pointed a black glove at the far wall of the room. Blue spotlights danced over the metal, and it began to rise up into the ceiling.

White light spilt from the widening gap, making everything ghostly.

The music rose to a pounding crescendo, and then stopped.

The wall was fully open now, to reveal a double row of the Visphoi bioconstructs.

'Aren't they beautiful?' said Violaine, admiration treacling her voice. 'The image of Visphoi purity. When we settled on Visphok centuries ago, this was our ideal. Soon, you will be living that ideal. '

Not if I have anything to do with it, thought Bernice.

Maeve saw a room full of old people.

*Old people.*

And she heard the words, the sick words of Violaine: 'Soon you will be living that ideal.'

And then she knew. The truth hit her like a bolt of lightning. The bioconstructs were empty shells, waiting for the implantation of controlling minds, like hers. She thought about how she had ended up in this body and realized with horror what Violaine was going to do.

She was going to enslave the Saraani. She was going to force them to perform Holy Transference on these poor unfortunates so they would end up just like Maeve. Prisoners in a body that wanted only to kill. The thought of the Saraani, the most holy creatures Maeve had ever encountered, being used, being *perverted*, by Violaine, made Maeve feel an anger like she had never known. A calm, cold anger.

Had God put her in this body so that she could kill Violaine?

Killing was against her beliefs, but if it would save the Saraani...

Maeve decided. She'd kill Violaine first, and then find Brion.

Some of the old people had got out of their beds, and were walking up to the bioconstructs, their faces alight with joy.

They wanted this. They wanted it to happen.

Maeve fought to control herself, and she was doing fine, keeping the wetware at bay.

And then she saw Brion.

Maeve restrained her emotions and focused on Brion. He was standing across the other side of the room, staring at her. No - staring at them all. All the bioconstructs. His creations. He had no way of knowing she was there. And even if he did, what could he do? What would he think of her, in this body?

As she realized that she still cared about what he thought, that she still cared what she looked like, Maeve almost laughed. Almost. But a laugh could so easily twist and sour into a sob, and if she started crying (did this body have tear ducts? - yes, but to remove foreign substances, not to vent emotion) Lord knows what would happen. Self-destruct? Not yet. Not just yet - not *quite* yet.

So Maeve stood in her sarcophagus, still and staring, fighting down her emotions.

She had to get to Brion - but if she moved, she'd give herself away. Dare she do that? There were about a dozen Visphoi soldiers dotted about the hall. Were their weapons any match for hers? In the middle was a tall figure she took to be Violaine herself.

It was her duty to kill Violaine. Her duty to God.

The old people were crowding closer to her now, stroking her boots, gazing up at her face. She could feel their eyes upon her. One of the Visphoi, a thin, wiry man in civilian clothes, was urging them to get back to their beds, but they weren't paying him any attention.

Then Maeve caught sight of another familiar figure. Benny. Her friend. What was she doing here? She couldn't be on Violaine's side, surely?

Maeve realized that she couldn't risk a battle. Not now, not with her friends here, with all these old people around. Too many innocent people would die.

She only hoped that she could stay in control.

That she would have a choice.

\* \* \*

The lights had come back up again, and the room was alive with excited babble. Violaine had stepped down from the podium, and was talking intently to Dr Narian.

Arvaile was standing near by, and something about the way he was looking at Violaine worried Bernice. 'I'm just going to have a word with Dr Arvaile,' she said, letting go of Moltor's hand.

She walked past Dr Narian, who was looking flustered. Violaine had obviously given him a stiff talking to. He called out loudly, 'Please all remain in your beds. You will be taken to the area of transference in due course.'

All the old people were ignoring him, getting up out of their beds for a closer look at their new bodies, like enthusiasts at a skimmer show.

Violaine clapped her hands. 'Return to your beds! That is an order!'

Some of them began to comply, but there was still a sizeable crowd around the bioconstructs.

Bernice was almost upon Arvaile when he cried out, 'It won't work!' he cried. 'It won't work!'

Bernice halted, frozen in horror, and then was at his side in an instant. 'What the hell do you think you are doing?'

'We've got to stop this. It's insane.'

Bernice felt like belting him. 'Oh, bloody hell, of course it's insane, of course we have got to stop it somehow, but getting ourselves killed is not going to help.'

Violaine came striding over to them, flanked by two dedicated-looking grunts.

Arvaile was fighting back sobs and biting his knuckles.

Bernice swore. He'd picked the worst possible time to crack up.

Violaine beckoned with a gloved finger. 'Dr Arvaile and his charming assistant. A word, please.'

The Visphoi soldiers levelled their weapons at the pair of them. Bernice found herself staring down the muzzles of two large and nasty-looking guns.

‘Back against that wall,’ said Violaine.

Bernice backed against the institutional-cream-painted wall, her palms sliding over its flaking surface. Sod Arvaile’s grief, he had effectively just killed them both. ‘You stupid, stupid git,’ she explained, right into Arvaile’s car, making him cringe.

‘I had my suspicions about both of you,’ said Violaine conversationally. ‘You, Bernice, because you appeared to know so little of my plans. You, Dr Arvaile, because there was always the possibility that you would, shall we say, “go native” on such a liberal, alien-infested planet such as this. I became concerned when you announced that you were going to marry a non-Visphoi. A woman of religion.’ Violaine’s mouth curled around that last word as though it were the name of her bitterest enemy.

‘I married Maeve for cover, Czaritza,’ said Arvaile in bafflement. ‘You, yourself, approved the union!’

Violaine moved closer to Arvaile. ‘Yes. Because it kept you where I wanted you. Where you could carry on your good work.’ She waved a hand at the line of bioconstructs.

‘You manipulative bitch,’ muttered Bernice under her breath.

Violaine turned to Bernice. ‘Why, thank you.’ An amused look played across her face. ‘It seems that the little cat is out of her bag.’

‘You are wrong, Czaritza,’ burbled Arvaile. ‘I am loyal! It’s just that your plan won’t work. I tested the process - and the subject rapidly became unstable. It killed Maeve.’ Arvaile began to cry.

Violaine ignored him, moving in on Bernice. ‘I heard rumours that there was an Earth operative on my trail. It appears that those rumours have some basis in fact.’ The dictator smiled. ‘What do you think of my little plan, spy?’

‘I’m not an Earth agent,’ said Bernice, deciding that there was no point in pretending any more. ‘But, morally speaking,

I'm on their side. Your "little plan" is sick and dangerous and by golly gosh it should be stopped.'

Violaine looked at Bernice levelly. 'Go on then. Stop me.' She turned away, seemingly no longer interested. 'Shoot them both.'

'But you need me!' bawled Arvaile.

What bravery in the face of death, thought Bernice scornfully. Then she realized she was just as scared as him.

'I have Dr Narian. You are superfluous.' Violaine turned away. 'Fire continuously at their heads on a low setting. I want to hear their brains boil.' Her businesslike tone hadn't changed.

The Visphoi soldiers brought their guns to bear.

'Some holiday this turned out to be,' muttered Bernice, gritting her teeth and closing her eyes.

## BOTTOM OF THE WELL

Maeve saw Brion and Bernice being roughly shoved up against the far wall. What was going on? Two soldiers were taking careful aim at them.

A firing squad.

The old people were clambering up on the scaffolding, prodding her, exclaiming in wonder. Maeve batted them out of the way, not caring if she hurt them, intent only on saving her friend and husband. She felt calm, in control, focused. The wetware was responding to her, working with her, rather than trying to take over. Good. Good. Stay calm.

Maeve leapt onto the tiled floor. There was an uproar, oldsters in blue pyjamas yelling and scrambling to get out of her way. Visphoi soldiers were weaving their way through the maze of beds, towards her.

Maeve sprang up onto a bed, aimed her needle laser and fired, twice.

The two-man firing squad fell to the floor, dead.

Dead.

A blaster bolt flew by her head. She ignored it, jumped back down off the bed and ran towards Bernice and Brion.

Bernice heard the sizzle of laser fire, two strangled cries and the sound of two bodies crashing to the floor.

She opened her eyes.

The two Visphoi soldiers lay face down on the black-and-white tiles, smoking holes in the backs of their uniforms.

Bernice blinked, glanced at Arvaile, and then noticed the commotion on the other side of the room.

‘What is this?’ said Violaine, calmly as ever, looking round to where the laser fire had come from.



One of the bioconstructs had come to life and was now picking its way inexorably through the beds towards them. Visphoi troops were attacking it with blaster fire, to little effect. Volunteers were wailing and screaming, climbing over each other to get away from the construct.

Somehow Bernice knew that this was the one which had killed the Theo-construct. She'd been wondering where it had got to. Now she knew.

But whose mind was inside this one?

'Dr Arvaile, is this some plot against me?' said Violaine, her left hand reaching into a pocket and sliding out something small.

A gun.

Arvaile was babbling. 'No, there was only one test subject. We terminated it. I don't know what this is, please!'

Bernice watched the construct dispatch a couple of Visphoi troops, cleanly and precisely, smoking holes appearing in their chests.

Violaine was bringing her gun to bear on Arvaile.

No one was paying Bernice any attention.

She lunged forward, grabbed Violaine's arm and brought it down against her thigh. She felt a blow across her back and staggered, doggedly hanging on to Violaine's gun arm. Another blow. Bernice managed to prise the blaster from Violaine and fling it into a corner. She straightened up and grabbed Violaine's free arm, muscles straining with the effort.

Violaine was incredibly strong. 'Do something, Arvaile,' panted Bernice. Her injured leg was beginning to throb again and, Goddess, if it started bleeding... Bernice managed to wrestle around so that Violaine was between her and the Visphoi troops, so they couldn't shoot at her without fatally injuring their Czaritza.

The bioconstruct was close, now, and showed no sign of stopping.

Arvaile picked up a discarded pulse rifle, and aimed it right at the bioconstruct.

A blip in the wetware. Emotion clawing its way into her mind, clouding her purpose.

Maeve stopped.

Brion was aiming a gun at her.

Maeve opened her mouth to call his name -

He fired.

Maeve absorbed the impact, staggering only slightly. She felt other, lesser impacts in her back. What could she do? She could never hope to take on so many. She had no experience in this. She was a Professor of Comparative Religion. A woman of peace.

Total panic engulfed her and she heard? felt? knew? the wetware tell her calmly that there was damage to minor systems and that to prevent such damage it was taking over for a little while.

*God is this what you really wanted to happen?*

Maeve felt herself slipping away, fingers scrabbling at the slimy sides of the well.

And the aperture in her right arm was dilating, and the tube of the Skailon denser was emerging and there was nothing she could do or maybe one thing before - before -

‘Benny, Brion, get out of here!’ she screamed, and then she was gone, spinning away to the bottom of the well as the wetware took over and the Devil began laughing without cease.

The construct spoke, its voice thick and slurred, as though drugged. ‘Benny, Brion, get out of here!’

*Bernice gasped. It knew their names.*

The surprise caused her to lose her grip on Violaine and Bernice gasped as the dictator elbowed her in the stomach and dived away.

She saw Arvaile running for the exit. Coward.

Right idea, though.

The construct was firing bolts from a compact laser cannon mounted in its arm, strafing the walls and ceiling, cutting out the lights one by one so that the room descended into gloom.

And from its other arm it was firing -

Goddess.

A flenser.

It fired a cone of air-warping energy, and anything in its path which was made of matter - anything at all - was stripped down to its constituent atoms.

The victims didn't even have time to scream.

Lieutenant Vash, her face a snarl of fury, was pumping blaster bolts at the construct.

Violaine was striding through the chaos, shouting orders. Everyone was running everywhere. Arvaile was frantically stabbing at the door control. 'It won't open!' he cried.

Great. That's all they needed. Bernice was shoved in the back as a stampede of people rolled over her. Bodies fell on top of her.

And then she heard Moltor calling for her.

Moltor peered into the darkness and confusion. Glasses were useless in all this glare. If only he had a pulse rifle.

Where was that pretty young nurse? 'Benny!' he cried 'What's happening? Benny!'

He could see a flashing, slicing red light. And another sound, a swift, surgical hissing. And screams and shouts. Blaster fire.

Combat. Now. And he was too old to do anything about it - other than run.

Just as he was about to ease himself out of bed, a body fell across his legs. Moltor sat up, flexing his legs to get it off. But it was no use. The body was too heavy and he was too weak.

'Benny!' he called again.

'Moltor!' cried Bernice. If she could only save one of them, just one, it would be worth it.

She ran across to the old man's bed. He was struggling to get out from under the dead weight of - well, a dead person, a heavy-looking Visphoi soldier.

Bernice heaved the corpse from the bed and helped Moltor to his feet. He took a few steps and stumbled. Was he injured?

Bernice glanced around. The light from behind the line of bioconstructs was white and harsh. People were struggling

out of the room that way, pushing between the rows of sarcophagi. Was that Violaine, making a getaway? She couldn't be sure. The rogue construct was the only thing left standing, swivelling jerkily around, loosing off bright-red laser beams and the deadly, ghostly, soap-bubble cones of flenser bolts.

She looked back to the door. It was still closed.

'Come on.' She grabbed Moltor and led him over to the door. She shoved Arvaile out of the way.

'It won't open!' he cried.

Bernice bent and picked up a discarded gun. 'Stand back!'

The old people around the door stepped swiftly aside and Bernice let the doors have it, right where they joined. Pulses of light poured from the end of the gun.

A laser bolt shot by the side of Bernice's head. She yelled. The door opened, and everyone scrambled to get out — Arvaile first, she noticed. He really was no gentleman.

Bernice ran after them, swearing continually and sincerely under her breath. She tumbled out of the room together with a dozen of the volunteers.

The construct was still loosing off its weapons. There was the crump of an explosion and Bernice staggered backwards as a wall of heat belched out of the room. It must have built-in grenades as well.

There couldn't possibly be anyone left alive in there now. Flensing weapons were clean, quick and efficient.

Bernice fought down the urge to vomit. She hit the door control, and the door hissed shut. She briefly checked her weapon. It was a plasma pulse rifle, decorated in baroque purple and black Visphoi livery. She'd used a similar type before, in days as dark as this. Much as she hated them, the use of weapons looked like being the only way out of this. But she would try to keep to inanimate targets, if possible.

She aimed the rifle at the lock and fired, turning it into a satisfyingly useless lump of melted metal and plastic.

Bernice stood, gasping, bathed in sweat, and suddenly her left leg gave way beneath her. She slumped to the metal-grilled floor. Alarms were blaring. It wouldn't be long before the whole place was swarming with troops.

Arvaile was leaning against the wall, weeping, evidently oblivious to everything except his own pain. Bernice gritted her teeth. There was a time and a place for self-pity and it was not now. 'Brion!' she called. 'Help me up!'

Arvaile came over and helped Bernice get to her feet. Her leg felt weak and wobbly, but there was no bleeding.

'Where are the Saraani being held?'

Arvaile said nothing.

'I said, where are -'

'I don't know!' he suddenly shouted, his face crumpling.

Bernice turned away, angry with him, and angry with herself for wanting to hit him.

Bernice went to check the other escapees - about twenty of the volunteers had made it. They seemed shell-shocked, but otherwise unharmed.

Moltor looked rather annoyed. We were going to have new bodies!' he said petulantly.

'Thank you for saving my life, Benny! ' said Bernice brightly.

'Huh,' said Moltor in a sulky, bewildered tone. 'Saved for what?'

Bernice thanked her lucky stars that she didn't have any elderly relatives. 'You'll thank me later,' she said gently, 'or I'll bloody belt you one.'

This elicited a smile at least.

She jumped as Arvaile grabbed her shoulder. 'Someone's coming!'

Bernice looked around wildly. There was nowhere to run.

Lieutenant Trione and a squad of troops appeared at the end of the corridor.

'Listen,' she whispered to Arvaile. 'We'll just have to bluff it out, hope that news of our "mutiny" hasn't spread.'

Trione crashed to a halt in front of her. 'What's happened here?' he asked gruffly.

Bernice saluted. 'One of the bioconstructs went haywire, sir. It's fitted with a flensing weapon. It's killed most of the volunteers, and Violaine is still in there with it.'

Trione swore. 'It was your job to ensure the viability of those constructs!'

A soldier was jabbing at the door control. 'The lock's fused, sir!'

'Cutting equipment, at the double!' barked Trione. 'Private Stritz, take the volunteers to safety.'

'I'll help,' volunteered Bernice.

'You stay here. I need you to help me disable this bioconstruct.'

Bernice exchanged a rueful smile with Moltor, and watched him waddle away with the rest of the old people. At least he was safe, but Bernice's heart felt heavy. Out of two hundred people, only a handful had survived.

Trione and Arvaile were discussing the job of dispatching the bioconstruct.

'Couldn't we use flensers against it?' asked Trione.

'Good idea,' said Bernice. 'That's what got the one which attacked me.'

'No good,' said Arvaile, shaking his head. 'The battle-ready constructs are fitted with the latest flenser-scrambling monomolecular shields.'

'We'll just have to try concentrated blaster fire,' said Trione.

'This is madness,' said Bernice. 'Suicide! It'll flense you into next Wednesday teatime!'

'The Czaritzza's still in there. We have no choice. You two stay outside and cover us.'

Bernice stood back, shaking her head sadly at the idiocy of the military mind.

'There is one chance,' said Arvaile. 'Aim for the head. It's unprotected. Before going into battle, the bioconstructs would be fitted with an integrated protective helmet. We can't do that until we transfer the volunteers' minds into them.'

'Right!' shouted Trione. 'Hear that lads? Aim for the head!'

A laser cutter was being brought to bear on the metal door.

'We've won a reprieve,' Bernice whispered to Arvaile. 'We just have to hope that Violaine's copped it.'

Arvaile nodded absently.

Trione and his squad were now stepping through the rough rectangle hewed by the laser cutter. Bernice hefted her gun. She hoped they did manage to finish it off. Then a thought struck her. 'It knew our names. How did it know our names?'

Arvaile eyes were haunted, dark, scared. 'I don't know.'

Maeve found herself standing in a room full of corpses.

Dear God, what had she done?

The place was awash with bodies. And the residue of bodies, coating the wall, shining wetly in the light.

She looked down at her right arm.

The flenser aperture was just closing, like a little mouth.

God could never have wanted this. He couldn't have put her in this body. This wasn't His plan. She was here by accident. And now she'd killed - not one evil person who deserved to die, but many, many innocent people.

Victims of evil.

Just as Maeve was a victim of evil.

She tried to tell herself that it wasn't her fault, that it was the wetware, but she knew that if she'd stayed in control this would never have happened.

Well, she was in control now. Time she did something positive.

She looked at the rows and rows of godless things in their sarcophagi. No question about it, they had to be destroyed. She didn't want even the slightest chance of anyone else having to go through what she was now enduring.

Maeve knew that she could detonate certain of her micro-grenades by remote control. Prime the grenade, release it, wait for it to achieve its target and then send the signal. She interrogated the machine, found out that she had just over two hundred such grenades.

Good.

There was a noise from behind her, a hissing, sizzling noise. They were cutting through the door. She had to work quickly. She went along the line of constructs, dispatching grenades, one to each sarcophagus.

There was a clang from behind.

She swung round.

The Visphoi troops had cut their way in and were now advancing upon her.

She raised her hands. 'I don't want to kill any more,' she said. 'Please go away or I'll have to -'

They opened fire.

Idiots!

Maeve ducked down behind a bed. What she needed was a distraction. So she concentrated on the detonation frequencies of the grenades.

Yes! That was it! She hadn't finished laying them, but even so -

Maeve retreated to a distance which the wetware informed her was safe, and primed the grenades.

And point zero three seconds later, she detonated them.

There was an explosion: a thunder-crash of sound and a blinding flash of white. A wall of flame burst outwards, roaring and billowing through the room.

'Get back!' yelled Bernice, as a tongue of flame licked out from the rectangular hole they'd cut in the door. The heat of the explosion hit Bernice first and she flung herself to the deck, dragging Arvaile down with her. She felt the hairs on the back of her neck crackle and burn. Then there was silence and a strange coolness.

Bernice looked up. The volunteers' ward was ablaze. The smell was indescribable - a mixture of burning fabric and flesh. Trione, his squad and the rogue construct must all have perished instantly.

'Trione?' she called. 'Anyone?'

Silence.

There was only smoke and flame.

And through the smoke, a tall, black figure.

The bioconstruct. It was still alive.

And it was coming for her.

\* \* \*

The wetware was informing Maeve about the damage to her body: loss of fluids, several fused circuits, malfunctioning relays, some scorching of the exo-armour. It was advising her



to report to her manufacturer before too long; the damage was minor, but if left unattended could cause problems.

She ignored it, ignored the lists and schematics which flickered in her vision.

She walked towards Bernice, her friend.

Bernice scrambled backwards against the far wall, aiming her pulse rifle at the advancing figure.

Arvaile was nowhere to be seen - he'd probably legged it, the coward. Funnily enough, this made Bernice feel rather safer, considering the number of times he'd endangered her life today.

The bioconstruct must be immensely strong to survive such a blast. And heat-resistant to an impressive degree. Not much chance of one pulse rifle bringing it down. Still, what choice did she have? She couldn't outrun it - not with her leg.

Bernice aimed, and pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened. The gun was jammed.

Bernice flung it aside, strangely glad that it wasn't working. She'd have to rely on her wits to get her out of this one.

'Hello there,' she said cheerily. 'Used too much fuel on the barbecue?'

The bioconstruct showed no sign of hearing her. It was walking slowly towards her, framed in the orange glow from the hole in the door. There was a jagged rent in its left leg, making it limp slightly.

'Hobbling a little, are we? I know exactly how you must feel.'

Its pale, androgynous face was burnt on one side, the black hair scorched off in places. Its mouth was working, pronouncing one word over and over. As it drew nearer, Bernice realized what that word was.

Her name.

'Ben-ny,' it was saying, said in its thick, disfigured voice, the sound a falling two-tone cadence. 'Ben-ny.'

Bernice remembered how it had known her and Arvaile's names.

These bioconstructs were mere receptacles, their brains blank, ready to be occupied by the minds of Violaine's volunteers. They could only become animate by some poor unfortunate dying and a Saraani performing Holy Transference on them and Holy Instruction on the bioconstruct.

She remembered the bioconstruct which had run out of B Hold.

And who had been hiding in B Hold? Vilbian.

*Oh.*

It was almost upon her, stooping down, its face still expressionless. It reached out a hand to her. and Bernice used it to pull herself upright, nose wrinkling at the acrid smell of burnt flesh.

Bernice stood face to face with the construct, gazing up into its black eyes, in its pale, heart-shaped face.

Bernice did not want to believe it, but there was only one person this could be. 'Maeve?' said Bernice tentatively. 'Is that you?'

Maeve wanted to scream. She wanted to cry. She wanted to hug Bernice. But all she could do was stand there. The wetware had paralysed her. It couldn't cope with this extreme of sadness.

Maeve managed to nod her head.

Bernice's face crumpled and she began crying, silently and without restraint, the tears rolling down her face. Maeve reached out to her friend. Bernice recoiled, blinking away tears, and then slowly, cautiously, extended her hand. Bernice's was so small and pink and bony next to Maeve's huge one, with its sinews and joints and creases picked out in ugly, glistening black artificial skin. Through the sensors, Maeve could feel the warmth of Benny's hand. She could even analyse the chemistry of her perspiration - the salt content, the pH balance.

'Vilbian did this. ' Bernice's face was grim, under the tears, her eyes hardening with anger.

Anger Maeve shared, but could not indulge, for then she might accidentally kill her friend. 'Yes.'

'Why?' asked Bernice.

'Don't know.'

'I'll bloody kill him,' said Bernice, her voice cracking. 'Oh. Maeve, I thought you were dead. I mean - it's good that you're alive - oh Goddess, there's nothing I can say, is there?'

'No.'

'Is there anything I can do?'

'Kill me.' Maeve knew that this was what she wanted. She had killed so many people, and as long as she stayed in this body, she would go on killing. 'I want to be dead.'

'No,' said Bernice, sniffing and wiping away tears. 'We can help you. Your body - your real body - is back at St Oscar's and as they say, we have the technology. Brion will help you.'

'I thought that at first. Too late for me now. I have sinned against God. Killed. Even if you can save me, I will have the memory of what I have done. I have perverted myself. I can never be Maeve again.'

Maeve noticed that Bernice was staring past her, back along the corridor. Maeve turned. Someone was walking towards them, his clothes blackened, an ugly cut on his forehead.

Brion.

Maeve stepped towards him.

*The bastard was responsible for this.*

Responsible for her being this way. He'd built the godless things.

Maeve could not stop the rising tide of anger, and her arms locked tightly around Brion, making him cry out.

What was she doing? What was going on? She tried to unclasp her arms but her body wouldn't respond. She tried to access the wetware, but she couldn't.

She'd lost control again.

'Benny!' Maeve cried. 'Help me! I don't want to kill him I don't want to kill him I don't want to -'

Brion was making a terrifying gurgling sound. It was the same sound as the Devil's laughter. The sound of death.

Her arms gripped tighter, tighter, tighter -

Bernice watched helplessly as the thing that was now Maeve crushed the life out of her own husband.

Arvaile screamed as the bioconstruct hugged him close to its chest.

Its face was expressionless, its mouth working, dribbling.

‘Maeve!’ yelled Bernice, trying to drag the strong arms away. Arvaile was uttering little whimpers, his eyes staring out of his head.

Suddenly, Maeve gave a convulsive heave and threw Arvaile to the floor.

The bioconstruct stood there, looking down at him, swaying slightly, saying Brion’s name over and over again in a moaning whisper.

Maeve looked down at the crushed body of her husband. His eyes were still open. Gazing into nothing. They’d gazed into her own eyes, once. Full of love -

But was that a lie?

No. She had to believe it. Full of love.

And she didn’t even have her own eyes now. They were the eyes of this thing - this godless thing -

Maeve raised her hands to her face, ready to tear her own eyes out, reach in and lobotomize herself.

Madness, I’m ready now. Death, come right in and do your stuff.

But her hands stopped short, fingers bent and hooked, trembling, inches from her eyes.

Of course. It wouldn’t let her. Self-destruction wasn’t allowed. It wasn’t part of the program.

There was only one thing she could do.

She unlocked every emotion, all the horror and terror and fear and grief she’d been storing up, all the things that made her want to climb out of her skin and burn it to ash -

All the -

All -

Ah -

She felt herself spinning away, her vision darkening, Brion’s body consumed by a black fog, her own mind

misting over as though drunk or drugged and she saw the redness descend, the schematics and figures going crazy like a videogame on overload –

And all –

And down –

Spinning –

Down, down, right to the bottom of the well where the Devil was waiting.

The bioconstruct which housed Maeve's mind hadn't moved for several minutes.

Bernice crept up to it carefully. 'Maeve?'

It showed no sign of hearing her. Suddenly an arm shot out, just missing Bernice.

Bernice staggered backwards. 'Shit!'

'Leave.' The word was long, drawn-out, a cry of pain. 'Go.'

Bernice understood. Maeve had only partial control over her artificial body - just like Theo. She was in considerable danger if she stayed where she was.

She backed away, and watched as the bioconstruct stepped over Brion's body and staggered off down the corridor. Its footsteps echoed into the distance.

Bernice was left alone with Brion's body. She didn't have to check; he was dead, eyes bulging out of his face, mouth contorted in a rigid grimace of terror and agony.

Bernice sighed and collapsed against the wall. She felt tired, her leg hurt and she was only just beginning to comprehend what had happened to Maeve. She stood there for a few minutes, not caring if the soldiers came, or even if Violaine herself turned up.

She gradually became aware of a sound from slightly further down the corridor. A regular tapping, the sound of something trapped signalling for help.

Bernice dragged herself towards the sound. It seemed to be coming from behind a windowless metal door, some distance away from the volunteers' ward.

The door was locked from the outside. Whoever had closed it must have wanted whatever was inside to stay inside. Bernice's hand hovered over the access panel. What if

it was another bioconstruct? An abortive early experiment, kept alive out of sheer scientific curiosity?

No. The sound was too gentle for that, a light but insistent tap-tap-tap.

Bernice unlocked the door, opened it and stepped back briskly, just in case. There stood a Saraani, claw bunched into a fist, comically surprised.

Bernice sighed with relief. She recognized this one from the greenish tint to its pale skin. 'Mirrium?'

Mirrium inclined his head in greeting. 'What is happening? Are you here to rescue us?'

'Um. Er. Yes.' That was the plan, wasn't it? Get the Saraani out of here. There was one problem - the only way in seemed to be by shuttle, and that would be a rather obvious way of leaving. Bernice had no idea how many soldiers Violaine had under her command. Trione's squad could have been the last of them, or she could have a couple of dozen more running about the place. Or a couple of hundred — the ship was big enough. We have to get out of here, quickly.'

Bernice let herself be ushered in by Mirrium. All the Saraani seemed to be there. The Khulayn approached her. 'What is the meaning of this? When are we to perform the transference?'

'You're not,' said Bernice. 'All the volunteers are dead, killed by a rogue bioconstruct. It's still at large on this ship, part of which is on fire, so I suggest we get off as soon as possible, get to the *Lady of Lorelei* and contact the authorities.'

There was a murmur of agreement and a surge of movement towards the doors. The Khulayn, however, stood firm. 'I always suspected that you switched sides, to save your own skin. I did not, and do not, trust you.' The Khulayn drew a blaster from beneath his robes. 'Where is Dr Arvaile?'

With a flash of movement, Mirrium snatched the blaster out of his hand.

The Khulayn tried to grab it back, but Bernice bore down on him. Rather to her surprise, he backed away. She suddenly realized that they all must have heard the alarms, and could smell the smoke, see the state of her face and the

corridor outside. The Khulayn was probably as frightened as the rest of them.

‘Arvaile’s dead, and we will be joining him if we don’t move, now,’ she explained briskly. ‘Are you all with me?’

There was a general chorus of assent, except for the Khulayn, who was looking around desperately, as if seeking an alternative explanation for events that didn’t involve his plan having been a total failure.

Mirrium was examining the blaster with curiosity. ‘There is another way out of here - a moving platform. That’s how we came in.’

‘All right, everyone, let’s move!’ she corralled them all out into the corridor. ‘Which way is it?’

Mirrium looked bewildered. ‘Brillig, do you remember?’

A little yellow-skinned Saraani with just two horns piped up, ‘This way!’ He scuttled off down the corridor, and they all followed.

Bernice found Vilbian. He was looking shaken, and there was something wrong with his arm - he carried it awkwardly, as if he had been hurt.

‘When we get out of here,’ she said, ‘I want to talk to you.’

Brillig gave a shout, and Bernice looked up to see a blast shield descending from the ceiling, slowly but inexorably. Whether it was automatic, a systems failure or a trap, Bernice didn’t know.

‘Quick! Everybody through!’ yelled Bernice, literally shoving Vilbian on ahead, and diving after him. She rolled free on the other side, and the blast shield hit the metal floor with a thump.

‘Is that everyone?’ she said.

‘The Khulayn and Mirrium are missing!’ said Brillig.

Bernice looked for an opening mechanism, but there wasn’t one. ‘Shit!’

Suddenly, an amplified voice blared from a hidden source, making them all jump.

‘This is the Czaritza. There has been a security breach. A bioconstruct has gone rogue. It is highly dangerous. Please engage with care. Furthermore, all available units are to search for Dr Brion Arvaile, Bernice Summerfield and the



Saraani. Shoot the humans on sight, but try to recapture as many Saraani as possible. I am sending images of Arvaile and Summerfield to your wrist terminals.'

'We'd better run,' said Vilbian, rather unnecessarily.

'It's this way!' called Brillig.

They all ran, their footsteps clattering on the metal corridor.

Mirrium pulled back at the last moment when the blast shield thudded into the floor. He turned - only to see another barrier about fifty metres down the corridor, barring his way.

Rather nearer than that stood the Khulayn, arms folded, his back against the wall. 'Well, Pilgrim Mirrium, what now?'

Mirrium fingered the blaster. The Khulayn's blaster. The weapon which had killed Zyquill. 'Where did you get this?'

'Dr Arvaile gave it to me, in case the situation became desperate.' He held out a claw. 'The situation is desperate. Return it to me. Now.'

Mirrium stepped back, colliding with the other wall. He raised the blaster. 'No.'

The Khulayn hissed. 'How dare you disobey me!'

He must think I'm a fool, thought Mirrium. No - he thinks I'm malleable, like the others. Well, he's wrong. 'Khulayn, you must see that what you have done has tested my faith to the limit.'

The Khulayn flexed his mandibles and snaked his tongue out, tasting the air. 'If you no longer have faith in me, why don't you kill me? There's nothing to stop you.'

Mirrium looked at the blaster, at its alien shape. This was what had killed Zyquill. But he knew that he couldn't use it on the Khulayn: if he did, he would become like the Khulayn.

He looked into the eyes of the other Saraani, eyes that had once seemed to hold all faith and wisdom, looked at the torn cloak that symbolized the order of fifty thousand lifetimes. He realized that even now, after all that had happened, he still wanted to believe that the Khulayn was not evil. Had not done this thing. Had not killed with this alien weapon.

Then, quite suddenly, the Khulayn looked away, and gave a little hoot of dismay, like an acolyte who has made some mistake with a ceremony.

And then Mirrium knew it was true. 'Why did you do it?' he asked, his voice so soft that it barely echoed off the metal walls. 'Why did you conspire with Violaine?'

The Khulayn still didn't look at him. 'I'll tell you why,' he said. 'Hatred. Hatred of the Renaissants. But it is not blind, purposeless hatred - my feelings are based on certitude. You know that without religion, the processes of Holy Transference, communion and Instruction will not function properly. In a few lifetimes, the Renaissants will be faced with a failure of the transference process, and the Saraani race will die out, all except for a few pockets of exiles such as ourselves. And we cannot thrive on other planets - Saraanis is our home. So you see why it is necessary to remove the Renaissants. Why it was necessary for someone to do what I have done.'

Mirrium knew that the ascent of the Renaissants was supposed to bring about the end of their race. He had been taught that faith was necessary, that the physical environment of Saraanis was necessary. That without the correct ceremonies. Holy Instruction and Holy Transference would soon cease to work, and Saraani would revert to being mindless animals. But he was no longer sure about anything he'd been taught. He was here, living and breathing, on an alien planet. His egg was still safe, despite all the shocks of the last few days. Maybe, then, what he had always believed was wrong. Maybe the customs of the Renaissants did not herald the end of the Saraani, but were merely different, as the Renaissants themselves believed.

Mirrium shook his head violently, trying to shake off the confusion of his thoughts. He knew he couldn't work it out, not now, not trapped on this alien ship where they both might die at any moment. But he was certain of one thing: whatever the truth, the Khulayn's plan could not be morally justified. It was wrong, absolutely wrong, in a way that transcended faith and politics.

There was a banging on the metal door behind them, and the guttural sound of human speech. The Khulayn arched his head up, tasted the air, his eyes glowing with an unmistakable hope.

Mirrium realized that the alien warlord might still be alive, that she might still want to carry out her plan. With a feeling close to terror, Mirrium realized that he might really have to kill the Khulayn to prevent this.

But perhaps there was another way. He walked up to Khulayn, pointing a claw at the other's chest. It was a gesture that the Khulayn would normally use when making a formal accusation, and he could see that its significance was not lost on the other Saraani. His gills fluttered, air whistling in and out.

'Did you really believe that Violaine would reinstate the religious order?' asked Mirrium.

The Khulayn's shoulders slumped. 'I had no choice. I had to believe her.'

Anger clouded Mirrium's mind. 'And you did not tell anyone this? You just used us - sterilized us - and then manipulated us into helping Violaine? Did it not occur to you that if you had explained your views, others might have felt the same way and helped you willingly?'

'Would you have helped willingly?'

'At least you could have given us the choice.'

'Violaine demanded that I guarantee your cooperation. This was the only way.'

'You're as bad - worse - than the Renaissants. At least they did not lie, did not kill.'

'In exiling us, they are killing us all!' hissed the Khulayn.

Mirrium watched him, surprising himself by the thoughts that were forming in his mind. 'So what if we do die out? Perhaps the GodUniverse has finished with us; Saraani have outgrown their use. Or perhaps the Renaissants are right, and their way will prove a golden age.'

The Khulayn uttered a hiss of revulsion. 'You are a Renaissance, just like Zyquill!'

'No,' explained Mirrium patiently. 'I'm thinking for myself, that is all.'

The Khulayn turned away in disgust.

‘I will make sure your crimes are heard before the Council of Khulayns,’ said Mirrium.

‘There is no Council of Khulayns. We’re scattered about the sector like vagabonds. Is that what you want? Is that the progress you desire?’

Mirrium ignored him. ‘Then we must make our own justice. The pilgrims shall decide your fate.’

‘I don’t think so,’ said the Khulayn. ‘You forget where we are.’

And then the blast doors began to rise up again, and Mirrium could see the booted feet of human soldiers in the widening gap.

Bernice pelted along the corridor, followed by a couple of dozen wailing, hooting Saraani. Their clawed feet clattered on the metal flooring. Occasionally there was a thump as one of the confused, terrified aliens collided with a wall.

This was the least inconspicuous escape Bernice had ever been involved in.

‘Can’t you get them to keep the noise down a bit?’ she asked Vilbian.

He nodded and fell back. ‘I’ll try.’

They reached a bulkhead with three archways leading off in different directions. Slatted doors barred the way to each. Bernice estimated that they were somewhere near the middle of the spherical section. ‘One of these must lead to the platform.’

‘I think it is that one.’ Brillig indicated the leftmost archway.

Bernice punched a control and the door clattered open to reveal another purple-walled, rubber-floored corridor. At the end of it was a glint of something that she hoped was daylight.

They set off down the corridor, little Brillig leading the way, running as fast as he could, his spined head angled back as if he were a professional sprinter. At last they reached a wide domed area, with a rectangular hatchway open to the air. ‘Dellah sunlight, how good it is to see you!’ cried Bernice.

Before the hatchway there was a rectangular platform which bizarrely reminded Bernice of a boxing ring. She ushered the Saraani onto it.

We cannot leave without the Khulayn and Mirrium,' said Brillig.

Bernice was fiddling with the controls of the platform 'Look, it's lucky enough that we've got this far.' The platform jerked into life. 'Don't worry. They won't kill them. They still need your co-operation.' *I hope.* 'We'll come back for them when we've got some authority and serious weaponry behind us.'

The platform started its descent. Goddess, it was slow. Bernice stared over to the *Lady of Lorelei*, shading her eyes against the sun, remembering how annoyed she had been about her bath taps. If only that was all she had to worry about now.

Several Saraani cried out and pointed up at the looming sphere of the Visphoi ship.

Visphoi soldiers had appeared on the lip of the hatch, crouching down and resting their rifles on their knees. They were smiling and laughing to each other, in no particular hurry to shoot the escapees. Bernice and the Saraani were sitting ducks. There was nowhere to hide. They had no weapons.

'Shit shit shit shit shit!' Bernice peered over the railing at the edge of the platform. It was too far to jump and even if they did, they could still be picked off with ease.

There was a pulse of light from above and Brillig screamed and fell against the railing. Others went to help him, but further shots drove them back.

He struggled, wriggled, screamed again as lines of charred flesh appeared on his body. They were toying with him. Bernice screamed at them to stop, but they carried on firing.

At last Brillig, his upper body a smoking husk, toppled over the railing, falling to the ground and landing with a nauseating crunch.

So much for Violaine needing Saraani cooperation.

The Saraani erupted into a deafening wailing, and began to mill about, causing the platform to judder alarmingly.

Bernice stared at the blackened, broken body, remembered how eager Brillig had been to escape. He'd never been truly aware of the danger, none of them had. Well, they were now, and they were going hysterical. All except Vilbian - what was it with Vilbian? Why was he different?

Bernice could see that the soldiers were still laughing, and moving to take aim again.

'Bastards.' Bernice hit the STOP button and the platform halted with a lurch. Bernice staggered, grabbing on to Vilbian for support. 'Your Czaritza wants the Saraani alive,' she called. 'You stupid lumps of crap,' she added under her breath. 'So we surrender. We're coming back up.'

The soldiers consulted briefly, and one of them waved assent.

Vilbian touched her arm. 'Don't do it.'

She shook him off. Couldn't he see that she had no choice?

Bernice pressed the UP button.

## TRUE FAITH

The blast shield was now fully open, to reveal Captain Atem and three Visphoi soldiers, all pointing weapons at Mirrium and the Khulayn.

‘Drop the blaster!’ barked Atem.

Mirrium did so. It clattered to the floor.

Captain Atem smiled at Mirrium, which seemed strange since this expression usually indicated friendliness in humans. Perhaps Captain Atem was different to the other Visphoi soldiers. Humans were so complicated, so individual. ‘Luckily for you, we have orders to take you alive. Move!’

Mirrium walked off down the corridor. Atem was talking into a wrist communicator. The three soldiers led the way, their weapons scouting the corridor ahead.

Suddenly Atem looked up from his communicator. ‘The rogue bioconstruct is in this sector,’ he warned. ‘You two stay in the middle. We’ll cover you.’

They were approaching a triple junction, lit by flickering, malfunctioning ceiling lights. Thin veils of smoke drifted through the air, irritating the sensitive membranes of Mirrium’s mouth.

He exchanged a worried glance with the Khulayn. ‘What is this bioconstruct?’

‘Dangerous.’ The Khulayn was flicking his tongue in and out. Mirrium realized that he was actually frightened. All his hauteur had vanished.

Suddenly, something ran round the corner.

The Khulayn hooted and dropped to the floor, his claws wrapping around his head. The three soldiers dropped into position, ready to fire. Mirrium didn’t know what to do, so he just stood there and stared at the new arrival.

‘Hold!’ yelled Captain Atem.

Mirrium saw that the new arrival was a chubby, aged, male human in a blue tunic. His dark eyes were covered by a strange wire device with lenses.

The soldiers had straightened up, the relief evident in their loose postures and the wide grins on their faces.

‘Moltor!’ said Captain Atem. ‘What’s going on?’

Moltor was practically jumping up and down. ‘One of the new bodies has come alive. It’s killed all my friends and it’s coming this way!’

‘Where is it now?’

‘Coming this way. Give me a weapon. Let me fight!’ said Moltor, his face eager.

Captain Atem smiled. ‘Leave it to the young bloods, old man.’

Moltor huffed and puffed.

Mirrium realized that the old human wasn’t actually scared. He was - excited.

And now he was waddling towards Mirrium and the Khulayn, his mouth dropping open. ‘You must be the Samies, then. My! You’re tall.’ He peered up at Mirrium, eyes all but disappearing in wrinkles.

‘It’s coming!’ yelled one of the soldiers. There was a silent beam of red light and he fell screaming to the floor.

And round the corner came a nightmare figure.

It was tall, jet black, with long muscled limbs and a human head. Mirrium was rooted to the spot.

‘That could have been my body,’ said Moltor. ‘But now everything’s ruined.’

What was the old human talking about? He didn’t seem to be frightened at all.

No time to think about it now. The - thing - was coming nearer. It raised an arm and the air *wobbled*. When Mirrium looked up again, Captain Atem and the other soldiers were - gone.

No. They were still there. Spread thinly over the walls and floor.

Moltor was already running down a side corridor, and Mirrium followed, grabbing the Khulayn. He could hear heavy footsteps behind him.



Moltor had stopped, and was pressing at a pad near an oval hatch in the wall. It sprang open and upwards. Moltor looked back at Mirrium and the Khulayn, waving at them to follow, and then grabbed onto the top of the hatch, swinging his legs in. The old man vanished down the hatch. Mirrium could hear his fading cry.

What was at the other end? How far down was the ground?

No time to think. Just do it. No time to even look to see if they were still being pursued.

Mirrium ushered the Khulayn into the hatch and let him go. He followed, and found himself sliding uncontrollably down a shiny tube.

And then all of a sudden he was in free fall outside the ship.

Maeve was talking to the Devil and he was telling her that every bad dream she'd ever had was true.

You'll never be a Marunian, you're too wild, girl.

Listen to your father, accept the truth!

If you leave home, we'll never let you back.

If you marry that heathen Visphoi scientist, you are turning your back on us for ever for ever for ever -

Shut shut shut shut shut *up*.

I'm getting out.

No you're not.

I am.

Mirrium hit the ground, much sooner than he expected, and rolled over.

He looked back up at the bulk of the battle cruiser, fearing that the thing would be firing down at them from the hole. But it was not. Mirrium couldn't even be sure if it had been chasing them.

Mirrium rolled onto his back. The blue sky was like a drink of pure water, after the gloomy interior of the Visphoi ship. Mirrium breathed in gratefully. He felt a sharp pain in his back, and sat up, alarmed; then realized that it was just a stick. He had landed in a cluster of dead vegetation, which had probably helped to break his fall. Still, he checked for

damage, running his claws down his legs, and up his body. Nothing was broken. Bruised maybe, but not broken. He fell a little winded and dizzy, but otherwise fine.

He hoped that his egg was undamaged. Yijioll's mind was still within his. Just. Communion was long over, and it wouldn't be long before Yijioll's mind died naturally. Mirrium would have to give birth soon.

Moltor had stood up, brushing leaves and small sticks off his dirty blue smock, taking off his eye-coverings and examining them critically. Mirrium regarded him distantly. He had a lot of facial hair, as white as the few clouds in the sky. He seemed preoccupied, muttering to himself, casting occasional glances back at the Visphoi ship.

There was no sign of the hovercraft, and for a moment Mirrium had the sickening thought that Bernice and the others had left without them. But then he realized that they were on the opposite side of the ship.

'Come on,' he said, 'we've got to -'

Then he noticed the Khulayn. He was lying quite still, and there was something strange... Mirrium went to him, saw the blood leaking from his mouth, heard the strangled whistling of air through his gills. Then Mirrium saw the slab of dark rock beneath the Saraani's skull, saw the blood pooling, and realized what had happened. The human and Mirrium had been lucky - the Khulayn had not. He had hit the rock, and his skull was broken. He was probably going to die.

Mirrium was afraid to touch him in case what he did hastened his death. He guiltily remembered wishing the Khulayn dead.

'Mirrium,' said the Khulayn, his voice faint, tongue lolling out of his mouth aperture. 'You must perform Holy Transference upon me. Now.'

'I cannot,' whispered Mirrium. 'I carry the mind of Yijioll, remember?'

The Khulayn uttered a low moan. 'So I am to die. No child will carry my memories, my experiences. '

Mirrium thought that this, on balance, was a good thing. A mind as twisted as the Khulayn's should never be allowed to pass on to the next generation. But he did not say this. He

just sat there and held the Khulayn's hand between his long claws.

'Mirrium, you know what I did was for the best reasons. For the good of Saraanis.'

Mirrium could not answer. The Khulayn's green eyes were misting over, their luminescence dimming. His skin looked pale and papery, like the wing of a dead insect.

'Forgive me.'

The words floated into the balmy air. The smell of the sea reached Mirrium's nostrils; the salt smell he associated with heresy. But what was heresy? What was belief? If belief could force you to do what the Khulayn had done, what use was it?

The Khulayn was right in one sense. It was the end of the Saraani - as they were. Renaissants or religious, the whole race was undergoing vast and irrevocable change. And Mirrium knew he would have to be part of it, to show the way for the religious orders. To educate them, let them see that they can think for themselves. It was the only way forward. The race was evolving, for the first time in tens of thousands of years. Perhaps the Khulayn, despite his atrocities, was a necessary part of that process of change. A catalyst.

Mirrium looked down into the Khulayn's face. The light was almost gone from his eyes. Mirrium tried to imagine the pain that the Khulayn had experienced, as he had chosen his path, as he had negotiated with Violaine, and realized what he had to do.

It must have taken courage. A suicidal kind of courage. The sort of courage where you are convinced that your way is right. Madness. To sterilize himself - to sterilize the others - to kill -

And what could Mirrium do, now? Mirrium, who had woken up to a whole new world, a world where he knew as a fact that an individual can make a difference.

'Forgive me.'

The words were fainter now, a mere breath upon the air.

Mirrium could shake his head, deny forgiveness. But what good would that do? The Khulayn would die, his mind passing into nothingness, his heart broken by his

failure. Or Mirrium could forgive - and the Khulayn would die peacefully, taking one small piece of goodwill into the beyond.

Mirrium gazed up into the sky, trying to connect with the GodUniverse. What did it want him to do? What was right?

Mirrium shook his head, suddenly feeling dizzy with independence. He knew what he had to do.

He put his claw onto the Khulayn's head. 'I forgive you.'

And he meant it. He really did forgive the Khulayn.

He forgave a being who had proved himself an enemy of Saraani faith.

Surely, now he would suffer the consequences.

But nothing changed, nothing fell apart, no angry God-Universe sent a bolt of fire to destroy him. All that happened was that the Khulayn died, and Mirrium let go of his claw. It fell to the ground, contracting slowly, digging tiny furrows into the sandy soil beside the rock.

'I forgive you,' repeated Mirrium, and then returned his gaze to the blue sky. 'Do you forgive me?'

The platform was nearing the hatch. Bernice couldn't think of anything to do. Perhaps she could try to reason with Violaine? With the bioconstructs all destroyed, surely the logical thing would be to let them all go? Then she remembered Violaine's calm, businesslike manner. The way she had casually ordered their deaths, hers and Arvaile's, in the most horrible manner possible. No. Violaine was not a person to be reasoned with.

So what? Hope? Act of-

Suddenly, the middle soldier let out a cry, and fell forwards over the edge of the hatch. He fell past, his mouth wide in a soundless scream, leaving a trail of smoke from the hole blasted through him. Bernice stepped forward and looked down. He had fallen next to Brillig.

Bernice looked back up. The other two were shouting, firing at something Bernice couldn't see because of the angle. Then there was a whooshing sound, and they disappeared. Bernice felt something like gentle summer rain on her face.

Not rain. The remains of two flensed bodies. Bernice yelled and grabbed the front of her dress, scrubbing her face. A flenser must mean -

She felt Vilbian's claw on her shoulder. 'Look!' Bernice looked. A face was peering out over the edge of the hatch. A pale face, under a matted bob of black hair. 'Maeve!' called Bernice.

The face retreated into shadow, and was gone. It was Maeve, Bernice was sure of it.

She'd saved their lives. All of them.

Should she go back up, and try to help her in some way? But had Maeve known anything about what she was doing? Was she back in control of her host body? And what could Bernice do about it if she did go up? The remaining Visphoi soldiers would probably kill her.

Concentrate. No. She had to get the Saraani out of here. They were still going up, so Bernice pressed the DOWN button and they went down again.

Violaine sat in her ready room, in a leather armchair, Lieutenant Vash at her side.

'Lieutenant Vash, status report.'

Vash consulted a holographic screen in front of her. 'The fire in the volunteers' ward is being contained.'

Good. 'The bioconstructs?'

'All destroyed. '

Not good. 'And the volunteers?'

'All but fifteen killed.'

Worst of all. Her loyal subjects. Violaine took the news calmly. It was the only way to be. 'Where is the rogue construct?'

'Last sighted in Section Fourteen.'

'And Dr Arvaile, Summerfield and the Saraani?'

Vash coughed uncomfortably. 'They have escaped, and are heading back towards the *Lady of Lorelei*. '

Violaine considered. What to do, what to do? With the volunteers dead and the bioconstructs destroyed, she didn't need the Saraani. 'Thank you, Vash. Route through missile control to me.'

‘Right away.’

A holographic tablet appeared in front of Violaine’s right hand, and a schematic of the island and the surrounding area in the middle of the room.

Her fingers moved deftly over the tablet.

The hovercraft was easy to steer. Two handles on a simple control panel - one controlled speed, the other direction. There was also a windscreen wiper to drive away the spray which occasionally fizzed across the front window. There were other things like fuel intake and air pressure and something called compensatory azimuth, but Bernice decided she could safely ignore them. This was only going to be a short hop, after all.

She glanced over her shoulder back out of the cabin at her Saraani charges, their pearly skin gleaming in the sun spilling through the windows. Through the rear window she could see the Visphoi ship, worryingly inert. Shouldn’t it be taking off or something? She had no idea whether Violaine was alive or dead.

She hoped Maeve was keeping the Visphoi dictator too busy to notice their escape.

They were getting nearer to the *Lady of Lorelei*. Bernice wondered how Donimo and the others were getting on. Wondered, even, if they were still alive.

Smith had finally come round to the idea of escape. It had taken what seemed like hours of discussion, but he had come round. Correction - he had been talked round. Now all they had to do was agree on a plan.

‘You could pretend to be ill,’ said Donimo, pointing at Professor Ingerskjold. ‘Call the guards in, and I’ll clobber them.’

Professor Ingerskjold had run out of cigarettes a considerable while ago, and the frown on her forehead was beginning to look permanent. ‘Why should I, the female, have to be the one to pretend to be ill?’

‘Yes - outmoded gender roles would be inappropriate in this situation,’ said Smith.

‘Thanks, I think,’ said Professor Ingerskjold drily.

‘But we have to get them in here some way. The door’s locked from the outside. And there is no other way out.’

‘All we have to do is get them to open the door,’ said Professor Southernay.

‘You know, I’m not even sure that they are still there,’ said Smith.

The others looked at him.

‘Well, what proof do we have? We haven’t heard any extraneous sounds for hours.’

‘Because we’ve all been talking,’ said Professor Ingerskjold. She laughed bitterly. ‘We’ve all been so wrapped up in ourselves that we haven’t been paying attention to what’s been going on outside.’

‘An interesting experiment in group dynamics,’ put in Smith. ‘I often conjectured -’

‘Yes, yes, we’ve got your point.’ Donimo went to the door and hammered on it. ‘Hello?’ he called. ‘Anyone there?’

There was silence.

‘They’ve probably gone back to the mothership,’ said Professor Southernay.

‘We’re of no importance in their plan,’ said Smith. ‘Whatever it is.’

Donimo was wrestling with a chair, pulling off its padded back and wrenching free one of the metal struts. ‘There’s no reason why we can’t escape now.’

Suddenly there was a dull boom, and the floor rocked beneath Smith.

‘What’s happening now?’ wailed Professor Southernay.

Donimo bent the metal chair-strut, grimacing with the effort.

Smith’s eyes locked with Professor Ingerskjold’s.

There was a second boom - louder. Closer.

‘We’re going to die!’ cried Southernay.

## LIFE'S HARD AND THEN YOU DON'T DIE

Maeve was in control again. Somehow, she had climbed up from the bottom of the well in her mind, escaped from the Devil and his echoing laughter, held insanity and death back for just that bit longer.

Perhaps it was because she'd killed Brion.

Somehow, there didn't seem to be anything to lose any more.

She was standing in a crescent-shaped room, lined with sleek control panels and curved chairs. The whole place was strewn with bodies, sliced and fried by her laser. Some had been the target of her flenser. That would explain why her feet were sticking to the floor.

Maeve hunted among the bodies for Violaine. Disappointingly, she wasn't among them, unless she was part of the jelly-like remains underfoot.

Maeve found a hologrammatic diagram in the middle of the room, showing the layout of the ship. A small gold V pulsed in an area marked 'Ready Room'. Was that Violaine?

Behind the diagram she could see a viewscreen image of the *Lady of Lorelei*, and a small shape skimming over the sea towards it which must be the hovercraft.

Bernice and the Saraani. She dimly remembered seeing Bernice's face, small and pink amongst the shiny faces of the Saraani, on a platform, going down towards a sandy beach and the metallic oval of the hovercraft.

She could so easily have killed them.

Now she was in control.

And then, without any warning, Maeve saw an explosion on the *Lady of Lorelei*, made soundless and terrible by distance.



Another missile speeding on its way. Figures poured into her mind: mass, trajectory, impact time and velocity. It must be Violaine. Violaine was doing this. Violaine had to die, whether it was God's plan or not. With a cry of fury, Maeve left the flight deck and headed for the ready room.

Mirrium and Moltor had left the body of the Khulayn and now plunged through thick vegetation, spindly trees and prickly shrubs, towards the beach where - hopefully — the hovercraft and rescue awaited them.

Moltor seemed surprisingly fit for an old human. 'All this running about is doing wonders for me. Never thought I'd see action again - not in this body.'

'How old are you?'

'Ninety-three Earth standard years. Why, how old are you?'

Mirrium felt a sense of shock. He'd known that humans lived a long time, but - more than nine lifespans! The things this little man must have seen! 'I am, I suppose, about six Earth standard years old.'

Moltor's eyes widened in surprise, and then he laughed. 'Well, you *are* tall for your age, little boy!'

Moltor amused Mirrium. He decided that he could quite get to like humans - the peaceful ones anyway.

Then there was a sound like summer thunder. Mirrium cast wildly around. Had they been discovered? Was someone firing at them?

No. The sound was coming from out to sea.

Bernice turned around, one hand on the directional control. 'Nearly there,' she called.

Suddenly all the Saraani stood as one, and wailed. Bernice frowned. Surely her driving wasn't that bad? 'What?'

She turned back round and gasped.

*The Lady of Lorelei.*

Part of it was exploding, sending bits of superstructure splashing into the sea. As she watched, the greenhouse

exploded in a bloom of orange, glass fragments fountaining into the sky.

Donimo. Bernice felt her throat choke up with anger. Obviously Violaine wasn't dead. Obviously she hadn't given up on her career of manic destruction yet either.

Then it occurred to Bernice that the hovercraft was quite likely to be the next target.

She turned the steering handle, nosing the craft in a wide arc, heading for the open sea. But even as she did it she knew that there was no way they could outrun a missile.

There was only one thing for it.

She set the controls to forward, slowed the motor as much as she dared, and pressed the door control. You weren't supposed to do this whilst the craft was in motion but you weren't supposed to abandon the controls either. In for a schilling, in for a groat.

She came out of the little cabin. 'We're going to have to swim for it. Violaine's probably got us in her sights.'

The Saraani stared at her.

'Come on! Move!' She yanked Vilbian to his feet, and propelled him towards the doors. She started unlacing her boots.

The Saraani were all leaping into the sea. Could they swim? Bernice saw spined heads bobbing above the water, blue cloaks floating around them like life-rafts.

Evidently they could.

Bernice made sure there was no one left on board, and then kicked off her boots and stood in the doorway.

She looked at the *Lady of Lorelei*. It was badly stricken, fires enveloping the stern. Surely Violaine could finish it off with one nuke? Perhaps she didn't want to. Oh Goddess, that was it. The sick bitch was playing with it.

Playing with the lives of her friends.

Bernice looked down at the sea, moving frighteningly quickly beneath her. The Saraani were some distance off to the left now, nearer to the island. She could see some of them swimming towards the shore.

Then she saw a streak of light in the sky, moving incredibly quickly. It was heading straight for the hovercraft.

Bernice jumped, knowing it was too late.  
The Shockwave hit her like a solid wall.

'We're under attack!' said Donimo, running for the door, armed with his impromptu jemmy.

He levered the door open, helped by Smith.

'Right, let's get the hell out of here!'

Smith followed them, his limbs shaking. Another explosion rocked the ship.

Out on the open deck. Smith shaded his eyes against the sunlight. He couldn't see the missiles, couldn't even see where they were coming from.

He was totally unused to this sort of crisis. Angry fifty-year-old chain-smoking climatologists and weeping septuagenarian oceanologists he could handle - but missiles? Attacks? Explosions? Smith was scared. So scared he couldn't move. So scared he couldn't even think.

He felt long-nailed hands grip his arms. 'Hamilton, come on! We've got to make it to the lifeboats!' Professor Ingerskjold's breath wafted over his face as she hauled him to his feet.

She dragged him along the open deck after Donimo, his feet skidding on the sea-sprayed surface. The air was full of foul-smelling smoke. Fragments of glowing metal were clattering down on the deck around them. Ahead, he could see the lifeboats, mounted on cranes near the bow. They were made of white fibreglass and they looked delicate, flimsy, a futile hope in the face of the insanity of the missiles.

There was another explosion, and Smith staggered against the cold metal wall.

Behind him. Professor Southernay had fallen.

Donimo had uncovered the lifeboat and was beckoning to them.

'Come on.' he shouted. 'If they hit the engines, we've had it.'

Smith hesitated, looking back. Professor Ingerskjold was helping Southernay to his feet.

Donimo was stabbing the large red button which would activate the lifeboat release.

Nothing was happening.

'Fuck!' said Donimo.

'What is it?'

'The cable's jammed. Mechanism must have been damaged by the attack.'

We could always swim for it,' suggested Professor Southernay. He was leaning on Ingerskjold, his face white.

Donimo shook his head. 'Don't be stupid.' He ran to the next lifeboat.

That one was stuck as well.

Donimo swore. 'They're all controlled by the same mechanism. Stay here.' He ran off, back towards the blaze.

'Where are you going?' cried Professor Ingerskjold

'Cutting equipment,' he called back.

Smith watched as Donimo ran back along the deck and through a door into the superstructure. There was another massive explosion.

They all hit the deck.

'Donimo!' called Professor Southernay.

Smith stood up. There was a blackened, smoking hole in the superstructure, at the exact point where Donimo had vanished.

Before anyone could speak. Smith felt the deck lurch beneath him, angling crazily down into the sea.

The hull must have been breached. They were sinking - and sinking fast. The deck was tilting perceptibly, loose objects sliding across it - broken glass, chairs, rope, an empty wine bottle, a sign saying EMERGENCY EXIT.

'Donimo!' cried Southernay again.

'Shit!' said Smith, hitting the red button.

The lifeboat sprang into action, its cover furling back.

It was working. It was working. It had only been temporarily stuck, not jammed.

Professor Southernay was already scrambling inside before the cover had even finished opening. Interesting. Although old, he was still intent on preserving his life, over that of the female.

Professor Ingerskjold was staring after Donimo, shock carved onto her face. 'He...'

'Don't think about it,' said Smith, grabbing her arm. 'Not yet. Get in the boat.'

She felt heavy and numb. She was in shock.

It was up to Smith to get her onto the lifeboat.

He half dragged, half carried her into the vessel. Inside the fibreglass space, there was just enough room to sit down. So Smith sat down. 'What happens now?'

Professor Ingerskjold indicated a control panel at the front of the lifeboat. 'There's a big red button right there in front of you,' she said in a voice of ice. 'I suggest you hit it, now.'

Smith had hit it before she stopped speaking, and the lifeboat was hauled into the air and over the railing. It descended with sickening swiftness, and with a lurch and a splash they were on the sea.

'Where are the oars?' yelled Smith, again realizing how totally unused he was to this sort of situation.

An automatic engine kicked in, and they were soon skimming across the ocean, away from the stricken ship.

Tears were drying on Professor Ingerskjold's face.

We should have gone back for him,' she said. 'He might still be alive.'

Smith moved to comfort her, but she shrugged him off.

He looked to Professor Southernay, but he was looking back at the *Lady of Lorelei*. The ship was sinking fast now, and flames were rising from the superstructure. More missiles hit.

Donimo was certainly dead. Smith realized.

If they had tried to escape earlier -

If he had listened to Professor Ingerskjold -

If he hadn't been so wrapped up in his theories

Smith shook his head. The lifeboat bucked and tipped in the waves from the shock of the explosions. 'Can we steer this thing?' he yelled, hanging on to the side.

Nobody replied.

At the rear, above the motor, was a big red handle.

Smith scrambled past his colleagues and assumed control, heading the lifeboat towards the island.

He was alive. That was all that mattered.

He'd deal with the grief and the guilt and the shock - all interesting emotions with which he was barely acquainted - much later.

Mirrium lay on the sand, peering through thin tufts of yellow grass at the lip of the dune. Moltor lay beside him, silenced by the sight that greeted them.

There was no sign of the *Lady of Lorelei*.

There was no sign of the hovercraft.

The bay was wreathed in smoke, and debris littered the water.

Mirrium watched uncomprehendingly as a bank of smoke drifted onto the beach.

*Vilbian. Thlyveer. Loreyn.*

Nothing left. Nothing at all except debris and a drifting, oily smoke.

Then Mirrium saw them. Horned heads, bobbing in the water.

They were all out there. Still alive.

Mirrium leapt up and began running over the dunes, down towards the sandy beach.

'Flight deck are no longer responding. Czaritza. ' Lieutenant Vash's voice was trembling with emotion, which annoyed Violaine.

People who lose their head in a crisis were no use to her. 'What?'

Vash's eyes were wide. 'They've all been killed.'

Violaine sighed. 'Route piloting control through to me, please. Lieutenant.'

'At once.'

A holographic sphere formed in the centre of the room, and Violaine got up out of her chair and plunged her hands into it.

'The blast from our take-off will obliterate any survivors. We're getting away with a clean break, Vash. Vash?'

Violaine turned.

Lieutenant Vash was lying on the floor, her mouth open in a silent scream, her head twisted at a strange angle.

Dead.

Standing over her was the rogue bioconstruct.

Maeve was in control, now, and she knew what she had to do.

‘I’m going to kill you, Ereshkigal Violaine,’ she said.

Violaine backed away from the control sphere, towards the door. She spoke, her voice still calm. ‘Tell me, who were you?’

Maeve bore down on the Visphoi dictator, reaching out and grasping her arms. ‘Maeve Ruthven. St Oscar’s Professor of Comparative Religion. Marunianist. Wife of Dr Brion Arvaile. Five feet nothing tall in my stockinged feet. Benny always beats me in arm-wrestling competitions. But because of you, what you made Brion do, I’m now inhabiting a body that can rip you in half as easily as a paper tissue.’

Violaine smiled, her black lips parting to reveal white teeth. ‘Yes, beautiful, aren’t you? So powerful. The Visphoi ideal.’ She frowned. ‘I see you are damaged. I can repair you.’

‘You’re not listening. I don’t want to live. I’ve sinned against God.’ Maeve pulled something out of her belt. ‘See this grenade? It can blow us both into the next life. As I have no reason to go on living any more because of what your beautiful machine has done to me, I’m going to use it. To kill you.’

Even this threat did not seem to worry Violaine. ‘There is no reason for you to do that.’

Maeve fought for control. ‘You’ve just killed my friend! And all the Saraani! I was supposed to take care of them!’

Violaine’s eyes widened. ‘You’re not in total control, are you? The wetware is in conflict with your will. The wetware is stronger.’ Her voice hardened. ‘I order you to let me go.’

‘You started this chain of events. You created my body. It could only end like this.’ It was the only way out. Maeve closed her eyes, and knew for certain that God was smiling

on her. Yes, he was saying, you can kill this one, you must kill this emissary of the Devil.

Maeve primed the grenade.

‘Don’t do this,’ said Violaine. ‘I can help you. I can give you a new body.’

Maeve wasn’t listening. She held onto Violaine tightly, crushing her, forcing fear into her pale face. Into her black eyes.

All Maeve had to do was send the command that would detonate the grenade, and then it would all be over.

All over.

Violaine dead.

And her life, over.

You can go on living, you don’t have to die.

I want to live.

Ignore that, it’s just the wetware not wanting to give up.

Violaine’s dark eyes, just like the eyes of a bioconstruct.

Brion’s eyes, bulging in death.

Benny’s blue eyes, wet with tears.

I want to die.

Maeve sent the command to detonate the grenade -

- and nothing happened.

Self-destruction is not allowed.

She couldn’t die, not at her own hands.

Maeve felt Violaine struggle. Before she could escape - before Maeve could even think about whether what she was going to do was right or wrong - the huge body had crushed the back of Violaine’s head. Maeve felt the skull crack open, blood spraying everywhere, pouring out of her mouth, staining the white teeth.

She let the body drop to the floor.

Violaine lay there, arms akimbo, a look of surprise on her dead face. There was a gurgle and the head lolled to one side, one final glop of blood spilling onto the metal floor.

Another death. A necessary killing, maybe, but still a killing.

Maeve felt sick. How could any of this have been God’s will? All the death - the old people, the Saraani, Brion - all the pain. All caused by science. If she’d never strayed from



the path set down in the Marunian tenets... But she hadn't. She'd thought she was being clever. She'd rebelled against her faith and now she was being punished.

Yes, that was it. This was her punishment. Her personal Hell.

## AT THE EDGE OF THE SEA

Wet. Wet and cold. No boots. Feet cold and they hurt. Cut and bleeding against the corals.

Bernice became aware of these things one by one, as she drifted slowly towards consciousness.

She was shivering uncontrollably, but she could feel the sun warming her body through her sodden clothes. Her green dress was probably ruined. There was a salt taste in her mouth - throat - ugh gak get it out -

Bernice jerked upright as if pulled by invisible strings. She vomited. When the contractions stopped, she looked around to get her bearings.

She was sitting on a beach. In front of her was the bluest sea she had ever seen.

What the hell was she doing being sick on a beach? Didn't she have some lecture notes to finish, somewhere?

No - hang on. She was on holiday, with Maeve.

And then Bernice's memory fully returned.

She closed her eyes and put her head in her hands and sobbed.

After a while, she heard someone walking up to her, and felt their shadow blot out the sun. She looked up, at a spiny alien head, on top of a sinewy body, wearing a blue cloak which hung limply and wetly around it. A Saraani. She recognized Vilbian, from the purple-green coloration around his gills.

She retched again, unable to control the contractions. Salt and snot ran down her nose, making her head feel as though it was splitting down the front.

She remembered the hovercraft, the sea enveloping her, a noise like the end of the world and -

‘Urrgghh,’ she gurgled. ‘I feel dreadful. How did I get here?’

‘I went back for you,’ said Vilbian simply.

She looked at him. So many questions she had to ask. ‘Thank you,’ she whispered. ‘The other Saraani?’

‘All of them survived.’

They were further along the beach, drying their cloaks in the sun. Slightly nearer, Bernice caught sight of a figure in black. Professor Smith.

She stood and walked over to him, her legs wobbling a little. He was leaning against a lifeboat. Professors Ingerskjold and Southernay were with him as well. Their faces were pale and drawn.

‘Where’s Donimo?’ asked Bernice, dreading the answer.

Smith looked away. We managed to get away in time. Most of the crew never made it.’

Bernice stared out to sea, biting her bottom lip. There was no sign of the *Lady of Lorelei*, except for a few pieces of unidentifiable debris, washed up on the shore.

‘He died trying to save us, Bernice,’ said Professor! Ingerskjold. her voice on the verge of tears.

Bernice felt cold and dead inside. The grief would come later, she knew; for now, she felt nothing but anger and frustration. All those people. The captain. *Donimo*. The crew. The students, dammit, *kids*. All dead. And for what?

‘Are you all right?’ asked Professor Southernay.

‘No of course I’m not fucking well all right.’ Bernice crouched down, digging her hands into the sand.

There was an embarrassed silence.

‘I’ve sent an SOS from my wristpad,’ said Professor Smith. ‘The Goll, Sytan and Zhurunti governments have decided to work together in the light of the Visphoi incursion.’

Brilliant, thought Bernice. It takes an alien invasion to make politicians work together.

Smith sniffed. We should be picked up in a few hours.’

He looked totally abashed. All his arrogance seemed to have vanished. She’d disliked him, back in the sick-bay on the *Lady of Lorelei*. Now there was nothing to dislike. He was just another human being in pain, suffering the

consequences of Violaine's actions, like Bernice, like all of them.

Bernice cast a glance back at Vilbian, who was still standing some distance away from the other Saraani. She wanted to get back to him, but there was something she had to do first.

What had happened to Maeve had blown the Saraani's closely guarded secrets wide open. Now everyone - everyone left alive, that is - knew all about Holy Transference.

'Look,' said Bernice, brushing the sand from her palms, 'I know we've all been through a lot, but I think we owe it to the Saraani to keep the secret of their rituals safe. If any of the big corporations find out that Saraani can literally reincarnate people, they won't get a moment's peace. So, we keep Holy Transference under our hats. Agreed?'

'Agreed,' said Smith.

The others nodded their assent.

'OK,' said Bernice. 'I'm just going to check on the Saraani, all right?'

They nodded.

Bernice stood painfully and set off.

She noticed with alarm that there were a dozen or so Visphoi soldiers on the beach as well, sitting further inland in the shadow of the jungle. They looked over to her, their expressions truculent.

Oh Goddess, they surely couldn't be planning anything now?

'Benny, thank you for saving my life!'

Bernice turned to see Moltor ambling towards her.

At least he'd made it. Her heart gladdened a little. 'Moltor! What happened?'

Moltor shrugged. 'I don't know. I escaped from the ship with a couple of the Sarnies and then the boat blew up.'

'Moltor, this is important. Is Violaine still alive? What are the Visphoi soldiers going to do now?'

'Violaine's dead. They found her body. That thing killed her,' said Moltor.

Bernice relaxed. Leaderless, the Visphoi posed a lesser threat. Hopefully. As long as there weren't any fanatics like Trione left alive.

'Those can't be all of Violaine's army,' mused Bernice. 'Where are the rest of them?'

'Some of them took the shuttles, high-tailed it out of here,' said Moltor.

Bernice looked up to the sky, half expecting to see the disc-shaped shuttles heading off into the blue. Obviously, they were long gone. Bernice hoped that they had fallen foul of the Goll or the Sylans. Or the Zhurunti, come to think of it.

Bernice walked up the beach, past the soldiers. Moltor beside her.

A thought struck her. 'Moltor, how many of the volunteers survived?'

Moltor's face creased in sadness. 'Only a dozen of us. There might be more, still on the ship.' He cast a glance over the treetops at the purple spheres of the Visphoi ship and grabbed Bernice's arm. 'That thing's probably still alive.'

That thing.

Maeve.

Bernice patted Moltor's arm gently. 'Don't worry about that,' she said, looking over towards the Saraani. Vilbian was there, standing on the edge of the group, staring at Bernice. 'I'm going to sort that out now.'

Bernice trudged across the sand to Vilbian. Her feet hurt. The cuts were puffed up and itchy. And her injured leg wasn't much better. And her ribs hurt. She needed a bath. And a good night's sleep. And a drink. But there were some things more important than her creature comforts, and she had to attend to them first.

Vilbian stood as still as a statue as she walked up to him, his cloak lifting gently in the sea breeze. It was as if he knew what she was going to say. Knew what she was going to accuse him of.

Bernice took a deep breath. 'I want to talk to you. I want to know why you did what you did to Maeve.'

Vilbian said nothing. He gestured for her sit. She sat, massaging her feet gently. 'Well? I'm waiting for an explanation.'

'You shall have one.'

Bernice listened as Vilbian told her about his dealings with Earth.

When he'd finished, Bernice took, a few moments to think about what he had said. 'Blimey, you kept that well hidden.'

'It's why I drink.'

Bernice frowned. 'You shouldn't have to have a reason to drink.'

'What's yours?'

Ah. Bernice thought for a second. 'The best and only reason. Because I like it. Do you like it?'

Vilbian shook his spined head. 'Not really. It just blurs things, makes it easier to reconcile my allegiances.'

Bernice got the feeling she was being side-tracked. His connection with Earth made what he had done to Maeve seem even more sinister. 'I still want to know why you put Maeve's mind into one of the bioconstructs.'

Vilbian looked out to sea, as if ashamed to meet Bernice's eyes. 'I needed a bioconstruct under my control, so that I could inform the Earth authorities of their programming and design functions. Since I had already communed with Maeve's mind, it seemed sensible to perform Holy Instruction, so that I would have a mind in the construct to aid me in communicating with the wetware.'

Bernice's mind reeled with anger. 'You lied. You told Mirrium that Maeve's mind was dead.'

'I had to lie. To get the job done. But I never sent the information I gleaned from the bioconstruct to Earth. The communications equipment was in my cabin, and before I could leave the hold you arrived, and I had to hide. You know the rest.' His spined head drooped into his chest. 'I failed. Failed totally.'

Which wasn't quite true - Violaine was dead, after all. She didn't say anything because right then she didn't particularly want to give Vilbian anything to feel good about. 'How come

Maeve's personality survived intact? I mean, what you told me in the carousel made it clear that Saraani personalities don't survive Holy Transference.'

Vilbian nodded. 'There was no long period of communion with Maeve's mind. And the bioconstructs were specially constructed with blank minds, to facilitate Holy Instruction.' Vilbian hissed, 'The evil of it!'

'You can talk all you like about evil,' said Bernice, 'but what you did was wrong. Very, very wrong.'

Vilbian hung his head. In shame? Bernice knew nothing about Saraani body language. The gesture could mean something else for all she knew.

Then Vilbian spoke, his gills humming. 'I know I have done wrong. How can I put things right?'

He sounded as if he meant it. 'There is only one way you can redeem yourself.'

Vilbian looked up, his green eyes blinking. 'How?'

'If we kill Maeve's bioconstruct body, could you perform Holy Transference on her again?'

Vilbian inclined his head.

Bernice knew what she was asking, knew what he was thinking. *Performing Holy Transference on aliens is forbidden.*

But after what he had done to Maeve, Vilbian really had no right to refuse.

After a while, he lifted his head and looked at her, his tongue flicking out, his gills thrumming. 'Yes. It is possible. But how are we going to kill something that is almost invincible?'

Good question. 'We'll think of something.'

They were safe at last.

Mirrium walked among the Saraani, touching their spined heads, stooping to soothe the anguished, muttering words of succour. In his heart, he felt a swooping sense of elation; he had come through alive, his egg almost ready to be born, his belief intact. Alongside that feeling was a knot of pain and sorrow for those that had been sterilized, and those that had died: Zyquill, Brillig, even the Khulayn.

Mirrium walked to the edge of the sea, and let the salt water wash over his feet. The salt taste of the sea filled the air as Mirrium drew it in through his gills. It no longer tasted alien and threatening, but somehow soothing and thrilling at the same time. The taste of the new Saraani future.

Mirrium turned around. They were all looking at him, green eyes expectant, waiting. He felt even more acutely the absence of Brillig, especially as he had been the only other carrying a child.

Now Mirrium's child would be born alone.

'Pilgrims,' he began. We have survived exile. We - you - have survived sterilization. We have survived the incomprehensible violence of these humans. 'The Visphoi ship loomed above the trees, a constant reminder of the force behind events on Dellah. 'Do you still have belief?'

A few Saraani dipped their heads to the sand. Others gazed up into the sky - that was a good sign.

'The Khulayn is dead,' said Mirrium. 'He was never a true Khulayn, never the guardian of belief he was supposed to be. Now you know that you were pawns in his plan, your faith may be challenged. But I say, believe. The Renaissants have cast us out, but despite what has happened here, I believe that this is a good world. We can settle here, build temples here, raise our young... '

The sound of sobbing reached his ears. Mirrium's heart quailed with grief. It was so easy to forget that they were all sterile, that they would never give birth. What was the use of temples? What was the use of religion?

They weren't paying attention to him.

He was in danger of losing them to despair.

That must never happen. 'Listen to me! You must be strong. You must have faith. There are more of us who still have belief, exiled to various worlds. I will ask some of them to join us here.' A few horned heads looked up, a few green eyes stared at him. 'They will perform Holy Transference on you when you die. Your experiences will live on in a new race of Saraani. The first to be born here on Dellah, a new world. And a new kind of temple will be built on this island - a Temple of Remembrance. In our past, individual Saraani



have never been honoured, but I will make sure that your names live on throughout the rest of Saraani history.'

The Saraani just stared at him. He had no idea if they believed him. But his words were not hollow. He would do what he had said. He would contact the other exiles, get more of them to come to Dellah. He would build a temple to remember them by, with his own hands if need be.

But not right now. What Mirrium wanted to do right now was to sit on the sand, the sand that reminded him of home, and rest for a while.

So he did.

He heard footsteps in the sand.

Mirrium looked up.

Thlyveer stood above him, his spined head framed against the blue sky. 'Thank you, Khulayn,' he said softly.

Mirrium didn't know what to say.

*Khulayn?*

Is that how they thought of him? Had he earned the right to be Khulayn?

Thlyveer was still standing there, waiting for Mirrium to speak.

'Rest, Thlyveer. Rest now. And pray.'

Thlyveer nodded.

Hardly the most scintillating words, but Mirrium was tired. He watched Thlyveer walk away.

He sighed, the salt smell infusing his head.

It no longer reminded him of heresy.

Dellah was going to be a good place to stay.

A good place to pray.

A good place.

## I WISH I NEVER SAW THE SUNSHINE

Bernice walked through the vegetation towards the Visphoi ship, Vilbian beside her. He pulled back the branch of a tree to let his cloak pass.

The bulk of the Visphoi battle cruiser blotted out the sun. Somewhere on that ship was Maeve, in the body of a killer bioconstruct. In pain. Needing help. Bernice swallowed. What she was about to do was dangerous, madness. But she couldn't leave her friend in torment.

She had to search the ship for Maeve.

They walked towards the hydraulic platform. Brillig's scorched body was beside it, blackened and broken. Next to him lay the dead Visphoi soldier. A cloud of insects buzzed above the corpses. Vilbian walked over, snaring a few of the bugs with his long tongue.

Bernice felt sick. 'Vilbian, stop that!'

He looked at her, mandibles working. 'I have not eaten for a long time,' he said. Then he resumed his meal.

Doing her best to ignore him, Bernice checked the platform over. It seemed to be still functional. She stepped onto it, beckoning to Vilbian.

He joined her and she activated the platform.

'OK,' said Bernice as they rose above the jungle. 'It's a big ship. I suggest we split up, and keep in touch via these.' She handed him a wrist communicator.

Moltor had persuaded the Visphoi soldiers to lend them some of their equipment - including a pair of pulse rifles. She hoped that they wouldn't have to use those.

They drew nearer the hatch, the wind ruffling Bernice's hair.

Maeve stood in the shuttle bay in the Visphoi ship, staring out at the blue sky framed in the bay entrance doors.

She'd jumped from a catwalk far above, in the hope that the fall would kill her. But it hadn't, of course. The bioconstruct was lithe and strong, and she'd landed upright, her limbs acting as shock absorbers. The impact hadn't even winded her. Of course - God wanted to punish her, so she wouldn't die. Not yet, perhaps not ever.

What now what now what now?

She had control. It seemed that now, her mind was fully integrated with the wetware. She'd defeated the Devil, drowned him in his stinking well. She could be angry, sad, happy - some chance of that! - and the wetware wouldn't interfere.

The only thing she couldn't do was what she most wanted.

To cease to exist.

She walked towards the oblong of blue sky, out of the shadow, into the sun.

She felt it on her face - on her pale, godless-thing face. The drop from the shuttle-bay to the ground would probably kill her, but Maeve knew she couldn't do it. The wetware would stop her, so she didn't even try.

Despair is the worst sin. Taking your own life is an affront to God.

And so was going on living like this.

She dropped to her knees in prayer.

'Dear God, I'm sorry,' she cried into the sky. 'Please let me die.'

Bernice limped along an arterial corridor, her footsteps echoing loudly, pulse rifle at the ready, alert for any signs of life. So far, she hadn't found any. The ship was deserted, though all the lighting and air-conditioning seemed to be working. The Visphoi had abandoned it, leaving it a tomb for their Czaritza. The only soldiers she came across were dead, their charred bodies reminding Bernice uncomfortably of Maeve's new capabilities.

She called Maeve's name, and her voice echoed for a very long time off the metal walls and floor. She had no idea where Maeve was - or even if she was still alive.

Suddenly her wrist communicator beeped. 'Yes?'

'I have searched the upper decks,' came Vilbian's voice. 'There is no sign of the bioconstruct.'

'Well done. Keep looking. And Vilbian, only call me if you find her. I practically fell over when that thing went off. Bernice out.'

Bernice carried on along the corridor. At the end, it branched into two. One way led to the flight deck and Violaine's ready room, the other to the shuttle bay.

Bernice paused, deliberating. And as she stood, she became aware of a strange noise. A distant, low moaning.

Something in pain.

Her mouth went dry.

It was coming from the direction of the shuttle bay. Bernice set off down the corridor, certain that this was Maeve. It was the same corridor she'd walked down with the Khulayn, Arvaile and Trione earlier that day. And they were all dead now.

There was a faint smell of smoke, and burning flesh.

Bernice swallowed.

She reached the door to the shuttle bay. It was open. She crept up to it, and peered round. There were only a few shuttles left; the Visphoi soldiers must have taken the others. At the far end of the huge space, there was an oval opening.

And framed against the blue sky, a tall figure.

Bernice crept into the middle of the shuttle bay. She activated her communicator, thanking the Goddess that it didn't bleep when you sent a message.

She whispered urgently into it. 'Vilbian. Found her. Shuttle bay. Get here quickly.'

Not waiting for his acknowledgement, she walked closer to Maeve.

Who turned, and was now watching Bernice, the pale androgynous face blank.

Bernice stopped. 'Maeve - it's me. I've come back for you. Come back to help you.'

Maeve raised an arm and pointed at her.

The slim tube of the flenser slid out of its aperture.

Bernice stooped and placed her pulse rifle on the floor, hoping that Maeve's wetware would acknowledge that she came in peace. 'Maeve, it's me. Benny.'

Maeve lowered her arm and the flenser retracted. She started walking towards Bernice.

'Maeve, listen to me. We can help you.'

Maeve was in touching distance now. All Bernice's instincts screamed at her to run, but she stood her ground.

A hand reached out for hers, and Bernice took it, wincing at the vicelike grip. 'Maeve.'

'Benny. I'm sorry.'

'I'm here.' The sight of that blank face, impassively mouthing Maeve's words, chilled Bernice. Maeve was in there, somewhere, lost and afraid, and it was up to Bernice to get her out.

There was only one - very slender - chance. One hope.

'Maeve, you don't have to die. We can save you. Your body is on ice back at St Oscar's, remember? And Vilbian can try to place your mind inside it. It might not work, but there's a chance.'

She could go back to being Maeve again. Maybe.

But didn't God want to punish her? How was this part of the punishment?

Then she saw, clearly, what God wanted. Repentance. She could repent, if she was human again. She could go back home, to her parents, to her priests, embrace Marunianism fully, preach against the evils of science, which she had witnessed first-hand. That was what all this had been about - all the horror and death - so that Maeve could live again and spend the rest of her life stopping anything like this happening ever again.

She knew it was impossible, of course. She would never be able to stop the march of scientific progress. No one could. But it was something to live for.

After what seemed an age, Maeve nodded slowly. 'Yes. Yes. I've worked it out. I want to live. It's what God wants.'

Bernice let this last remark go. If it comforted Maeve to believe that, then let her. If she had been in Maeve's position she probably would have cracked. Maeve's belief had carried her this far and the strength it had given her took Bernice's breath away in admiration.

'Maeve,' said Bernice gently, 'to do this, the bioconstruct body has to die.' She swallowed, her mouth dry. 'You must tell us how to kill you.'

Maeve shook her head. 'Can't.'

'Maeve, if we kill you then Vilbian can perform Holy Transference on you!'

'Vilbian?' said Maeve slowly. 'The Saraani? Are they...?'

'They're all right, Maeve. They survived. They're going to settle on Dellah after all.'

Maeve didn't smile - she probably couldn't - but her shoulders slumped slightly in relief.

Bernice wanted to get this over quickly. She didn't know if she could stand seeing Maeve like this for much longer. 'Maeve, you must tell me how to kill y- your body?'

'Can't. Won't let me.' Maeve raised her arm. There was a wet popping noise as the flenser slid out of its aperture again.

Goddess, where was Vilbian? If Maeve's wetware decided she was a threat...

Bernice stood back. 'Maeve, tell me how I -'

Maeve's face twisted in pain. 'Deactivation - not allowed - Benny, it won't let me go! - Not allowed - but it's damaged - needs repairs - deactivation stud enabled - behind ear - disabled - enabled -'

Maeve began staggering about, arms flailing.

There was no way Bernice could get near enough to reach the deactivation stud. Even if it was enabled when she did. It was no good. Maeve was beyond help.

Bernice turned and ran. She heard the bioconstruct clumping behind her.

She made it to the door and pelted down the corridor, ignoring the agonizing pain in her leg. Behind her, she could hear the surgical hiss of flenser bolts, merging with inhuman howls.

Maeve was still in there, still in control. Just.

And when Maeve lost it and the military wetware took over, Bernice could never outrun it. Never. She was going to die and oh Goddess why had she decided to do this?

*To help her friend.*

A laser beam sizzled past her car and Bernice yelled.

She reached the fork in the corridor, rounded a corner and collided with Vilbian.

'Vilbian! She's told me how to deactivate the bioconstruct but it's no use -'

Vilbian was already turning and running, his claw around Bernice's wrist, dragging her along.

Behind, the sound of pursuit drew closer.

The Devil wasn't dead.

He'd just been faking.

Maeve wasn't in control, not any more. The wetware had tricked her.

This must all be part of the punishment.

Telling Bernice how to deactivate her had been a mistake. The wetware hadn't liked that. Now the wetware was taking over-

*Kill kill kill Bernice.*

And all Maeve could do was try hard to make it miss -

*Targeting subroutine corrupted.*

Stop it using oh God the flenser-

*Flenser inoperative - damage — repair needed.*

And try to slow it down -

Maeve could see the walls and ceiling of the corridor as they sped past. Two figures, one human (her *friend*), one Saraani.

The wetware was doing all it could to target them. But Maeve wouldn't let it. She chased Bernice and Vilbian all the way to the hydraulic platform. Watched as they boarded it.

With an effort, she made her body stop.

Let them go. Let them go.

She felt herself calming down, the wetware idling.

Bernice had offered her hope. There was a way out - Holy Transference. She could be Maeve again.

Bernice made it onto the platform, Vilbian crashing into her. They pressed the DOWN button.

Then Maeve appeared at the lip of the hatch.

She stood on the edge, staring down, arms at her side.

Not firing at them.

And then, with a yell, she jumped, and landed with an impact which rocked the platform. Bernice staggered and held on to the railing.

‘Maeve, can you hear me?’

Maeve nodded. ‘I - can’t - control it - targets obtained - range -’

She lunged at Vilbian.

The Saraani grasped the bioconstruct around the waist, trying to force it back against the railing. Bernice ducked as a flailing arm whizzed past.

She looked over the side. Not too far to jump.

Vilbian and Maeve collided with her, and the platform wobbled alarmingly.

Three, four metres?

Bernice jumped.

She landed with a thump which winded her and sent a pain right up her leg along her spine to the back of her skull. Flashing lights burst in her head and she screamed.

She rolled over and looked up, seeing a blurry vision of the descending platform, a square shape against the blue sky, getting bigger and bigger and oh Goddess if she stayed where she was it would crush her -

Bernice scrambled out of the way, face twisted in pain, as the platform touched down with a hiss of hydraulics. She sat up, her head swimming, vision swaying.

Vilbian and Maeve had staggered from the platform and were now locked in a bizarre ballet.

The bioconstruct’s hands were around Vilbian’s head, fingers interlaced with his horns, and they were strong enough to crush -

With a yell, Bernice leapt up, feet scuffing the sand, and threw herself at the pair.

Bernice circled round and grabbed Maeve around the neck, feeling behind the ear. The skin was cold and waxy and there



was a small bump, no bigger than a pimple. Bernice pressed it and -

Maeve ceased her struggles, and the bioconstruct became a dead weight.

Bernice stepped back as it crashed to its knees.

It then fell face down to the sand, jerked once, and was still.

Bernice met Vilbian's eyes. 'Don't just stand there - do it! Do it now!'

'Help me turn it over.'

Bernice and Vilbian struggled with the thing. It was incredibly heavy. Bernice wondered if Maeve was still conscious inside it. The eyes looked dead, but -

'Stand back.' Vilbian half pushed her out of the way. Then he bent over the bioconstruct, taking its head in both claws and lifting it to his, like a lover. He prised open the pale mouth, and his mandibles widened. The white appendage snaked out and into the mouth of the bioconstruct.

Maeve stared up at Vilbian's spiny face, her vision blurred.

Then she felt Vilbian's mind touch hers.

What was he doing? Was he trying to save her?

She knew it was no good. The wetware would never let him. It was programmed for self-preservation. Without her controlling influence, the bioconstruct would die.

It would never let her go.

But something was going wrong. Between Vilbian pulling, and the wetware not letting go, she felt her mind being freed.

Oh, let this body die. This godless body. Her soul would survive, she was sure. God would see that she had done no wrong. It was this body. The wetware, the programming.

The view of Vilbian's head - dark spines against a royal-blue sky - suddenly vanished, as though switched off.

\* \* \*

Vilbian remained still for a few minutes, and then he broke away. The bioconstruct lay there, a broken machine.

'Well?'

Vilbian shook his head. 'She's gone.'

A cold feeling washed through Bernice. 'What do you mean?'

'She is dead.'

Bernice struggled to speak. 'But you did Holy Transference - I saw you.'

Vilbian shook his head. 'It failed.'

Bernice felt weak with futility, as if she herself was on her deathbed, longing for a way out.

To lose Maeve once was bad enough. 'What happened?'

'Her mind was corrupted. Something wouldn't let it go. I couldn't perform Holy Transference.'

So she'd killed Maeve.

She, Bernice, had killed Maeve and oh Goddess this was so unfair -

Bernice stooped down beside Maeve's body. It was cold, ugly, a manufactured thing. Nothing to do with Maeve whatsoever.

Tears fell from Bernice's eyes onto the pale face, ran down those dead cheeks.

Bernice closed her eyes and sobbed. She'd killed her friend, robbed her of her only chance of life. What did that make her?

And Maeve's real body was back at St Oscar's. There would be a funeral.

The guilt would kill her.

Vilbian's fluting voice sounded distant and sad, like a disillusioned angel. 'Her mind is dead. She is at peace. There was nothing you could do.'

There would be a funeral and she'd be expected to go but Goddess she couldn't stand it.

'Benny,' said Vilbian. 'I am sorry.'

Bernice didn't look at him. 'Go away.'

She heard him let out a sighing breath, and his claws shuffle against the dry sand as he left.

Bernice stared down at her injured feet, and her hands, trying to imagine what Maeve's final hours had been like, trapped inside the body of a killing machine.

She tried to think of something appropriate to say, some words which would help all this make sense, kill the guilt,

help her feel better. Help put right not just the loss of Maeve, but of Donimo, the captain - everyone else who'd died.

But she couldn't. She was light-headed with grief and fatigue. Her throat was dry and she was bruised all over.

She turned and walked away, out of the shadow of the battle cruiser and into the warmth of the sun.